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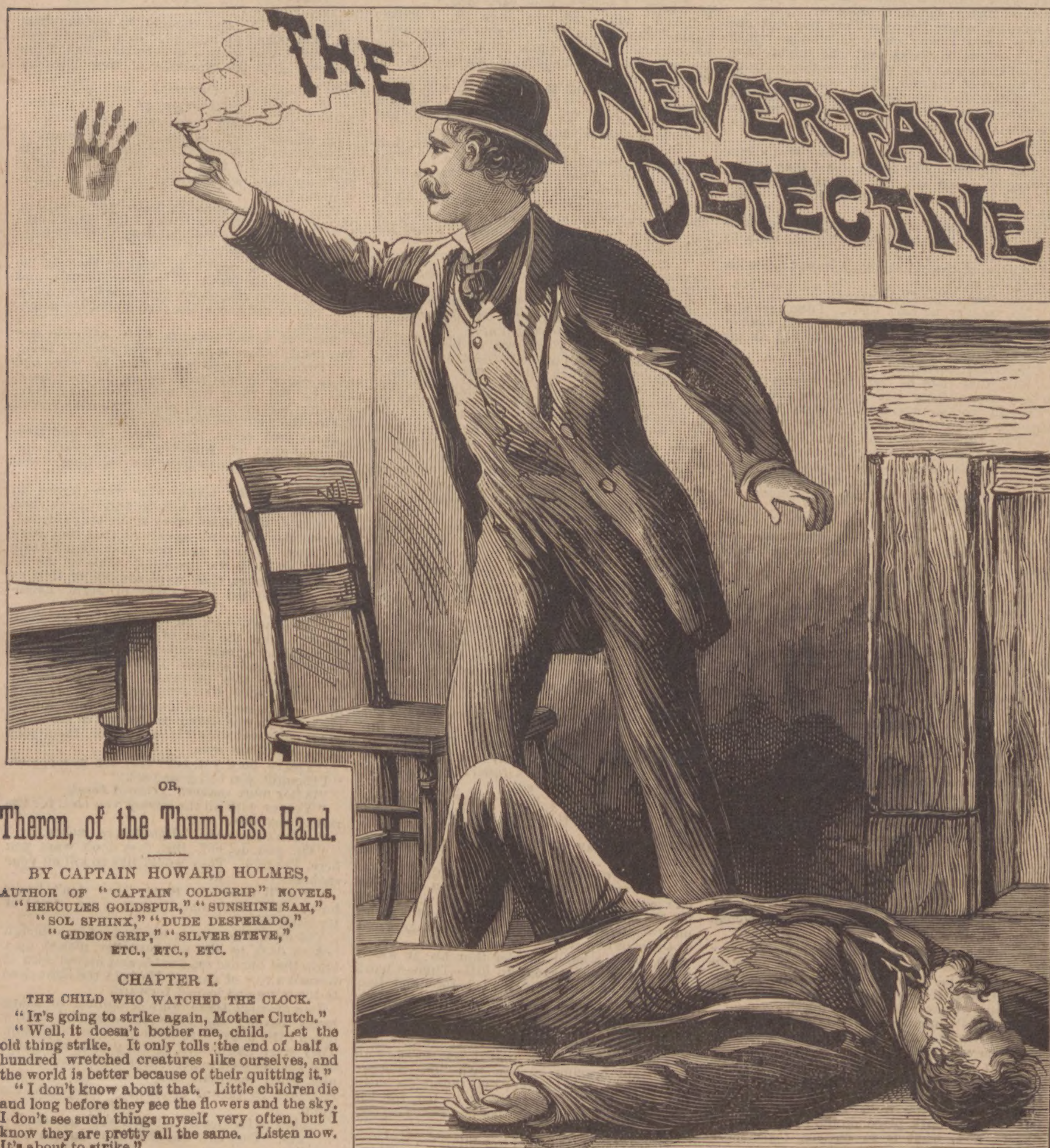
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OR,

Theron, of the Thumbless Hand.

BY CAPTAIN HOWARD HOLMES,
AUTHOR OF "CAPTAIN COLDGRIP" NOVELS,
"HERCULES GOLDSBUR," "SUNSHINE SAM,"
"SOL SPHINX," "DUDE DESPERADO,"
"GIDEON GRIP," "SILVER STEVE,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE CHILD WHO WATCHED THE CLOCK.

"It's going to strike again, Mother Clutch."
"Well, it doesn't bother me, child. Let the old thing strike. It only tells the end of half a hundred wretched creatures like ourselves, and the world is better because of their quitting it."
"I don't know about that. Little children die and long before they see the flowers and the sky. I don't see such things myself very often, but I know they are pretty all the same. Listen now. It's about to strike."

The woman called Mother Clutch looked up and glanced at the old clock which stood on the

THAT BLOODY IMPRINT ON THE WALL FOR A MOMENT DREW THE DETECTIVE FROM
THE DEAD MAN ON THE FLOOR.

shelf nailed to the wall of the wretched room, and, while it struck eleven, turned her eyes to the child, who was listening with a sudden ray of light on the face usually sad.

For months the little one's occupation was watching the clock and waiting for its musical strokes.

This seemed to be all the happiness she had and she never varied it between the four smoky walls which she called home.

The scene was the back room of one of the hundreds of tenements that dot the great metropolis—a room which was the living apartment of the two thus strangely thrown together. Little Tina and Mother Clutch were not relatives; there was nothing about them to even suggest such a thing.

Fate and poverty had thrown them together. The one had picked up the other and the child had gone home with the woman who was to become her guardian and, at last, her real friend.

Mother Clutch lived in the room where the child had listened to the clock. No one seemed to know what she did for a living; she went out now and then but never in the garish light of day. She glided down the dark streets when the city was wrapped in night and when the silent and motionless figures of its blue-coated guardians were not as wary as they should be.

Some called Mother Clutch a gutter scavenger; others, who saw her for a few seconds as she showed her poorly-robed body in the lamplight, took her for a lineal descendant of the Witch of Endor; but all avoided her.

The room where the pair lived had but one window and it looked out upon a house which stood so close to theirs that one might have crawled from that very window to the one nearest it by aid of a ladder. This other house was a tall affair like the tenement where Mother Clutch and her *protegee* lived, and the window opposite theirs had a strange charm for the child.

Night after night little Tina had seen a face at that window. She had noticed that it was the face of a man who had passed middle age and who looked sorrowful and sad of countenance.

On this particular night, and when the clock had tolled off the hour, Tina turned and ran to the window.

The eyes of the old woman followed her with a watchful smile.

"Is he there, Tina?" she asked.

"No, mother, he isn't there. I don't see him at all and you know he has stood at the window for I don't know how long and looked at me while I watched the clock."

"He's busy, perhaps."

"But, what does he do? He never seems to be busy at anything, but I can't see him now."

The old woman who was mending a rough garment at the table bent over her work and bit off the thread. Then she turned the garment and began to sew at another place.

"He must be one of the dead people you have just talked about," remarked the child, turning from the window and watching the woman as if expecting some attention.

"What, the man over there? Pish! child; he's never going to die. You don't know yet that people who have the leanest and saddest of faces really live the longest. By the way, you haven't found out his name yet."

Tina laughed.

"I saw him at the window last night while you were out and tried to talk with him."

"Well?"

"He didn't care to say anything, and when I asked him what he did in that house and who he was, he closed the window and vanished."

"That shows that he wants no one to interfere with his business," smiled the old woman.

"You'll not ask him again, eh, child?"

"I don't know, but I would like to find out something about him."

"When did you see him last?"

"When the clock had struck ten."

"An hour ago?"

"Yes, mother."

"Was he at the window?"

"His face was pressed against the pane and he seemed to be watching the clock with me. He can hear it from his room—I am sure he can—for he is always at the window while it strikes, just as if he delighted to hear the strokes."

Little Tina lingered at the sill upon which she could barely rest her arms and the old woman went on with her work.

"There he is!" Tina suddenly cried. "I see—"

"No, it is not the man I have seen there, but some one else! Look how his shadow falls on the wall! Quick, Mother Clutch! You want to see that man. I never saw him before."

The child's manner startled Mother Clutch, and she threw down her work and leaned toward the window.

"You are too late. The man is gone now. He passed the window and vanished. I saw him for a moment, a tall-looking man with a hand that rested on the wall. See! The hand has left a heavy dark place on the wall. I see the fingers, and, what is so curious, there is no thumb!"

Mother Clutch now opened the window and leaned over the sill.

From the alley far below came the sounds of night traffic. It was nearing midnight and the only thing seen in the upper world was the head of Mother Clutch as she tried to look into the room opposite her own.

"See the hand—on the wall, mother!" cried the child, still excited and pale. "It is there where the man left it. Don't you see the marks of the fingers? But, where is the thumb?"

The old woman turned to the child, at whose face she gazed a moment without speaking.

"Are you sure you saw a man in the room yonder?" she asked at length.

"Indeed I did, mother. He was a tall man for he stooped as he crossed the room toward the door, and when he took his hand away from the wall there was a dark spot there."

"I see it! It looks something like a human hand but—"

"It has no thumb."

"True; I can't see any," admitted the old night prowler.

Mother Clutch closed the window and for some time stood undecided in the middle of the chamber. She was alone with her *protegee*, and the hands of the clock were creeping round the dial toward the hour of midnight.

"Can you remain here alone, Tina?" she asked.

"Why can't I?" piped the little one. "You have left me here before now and I'm not afraid of ghosts and such things."

"I thought you were not. I will be back presently. I won't be gone very long."

"And I will watch the clock till it strikes again," smiled Tina. "I will pass the time away as best I can. But are you going to look after the man who left the print of his hand on Mr. Mystery's wall?"

"Not I," answered Mother Clutch with a perceptible shudder. "It is none of my business whose hand it is. We don't know that man and he certainly has never cared to know us."

"But he seemed to take delight in looking into our room," interrupted the little one. "Why, Mother Clutch, I have seen him looking in at all hours, and once when I opened my eyes on the bed with the sunlight streaming into the room, he had his window up, and I caught him there, eyeing me in a very strange manner. I would like to know—"

"I guess it isn't any of our business," and the next moment the old protector was gone.

Tina turned again to the window.

The Unknown had a curtain which he always drew to before retiring, but it had been open all the evening, as if he was still up.

The light in the room was so placed as to throw upon the wall opposite the stranger's window any figure which might come between it and the window. Little Tina had never crossed the threshold of the Unknown's room, but she fancied that the light came from a lamp on a table which she could not see, and that, being there, it could throw upon the wall the pantomimic shadows she had sometimes seen.

When Mother Clutch had taken her departure the child, for want of something better to do, turned to the window and fell to watching the singular impression on the wall.

Her eyes were as bright as they were blue, and she saw distinctly the hand which some one had left on the white wall. It had no thumb, as she had declared to Mother Clutch, and it was the absence of that member which had startled Tina and opened her eyes with excitement.

Riveted to the window by that hand, as it were, she stood there and never heard the clock ticking on its shelf behind her. She did not know that the hands were almost together and that in a few minutes the hour of twelve would be struck.

Suddenly the clear tones of the clock rung out and Tina turned and watched it while they filled the room with their sound. The clock had fascinated the child for many months; but now it seemed to strike with a funeral cadence that sunk like lead into her soul.

"I wonder if he heard that?" cried Tina, whirling toward the window of "Mr. Mystery's" room.

What she saw at that moment almost froze her blood.

A hand was drawing the curtain to!

It was not the long hand of the man whom she had watched so long at the window. It was not the hand which he had rested on the panes until she seemed to look through the fingers and at the wall beyond.

No, it was a hand heavier than his; it was a hand which was strange to little Tina—a hand which she had seen, but once before and that was when it left its mark on the wall.

In short, it was a hand without a thumb; it was a hand which seemed to photograph itself on the child's brain. Somehow or other, young as she was, she believed that it was to have an important bearing on her own life. She appeared to feel the touch of that thumbless member, as if fate had brought it to her for her own destruction, and yet she had never dreamed of an enemy.

The curtain was pulled to while Tina watched the operation.

Then the hand vanished and no longer ap-

peared on the wall, for the closing of the curtain shut off that sight.

For a moment there was a shadow on the ceiling in the room opposite, a shadow that crept toward one corner and went out of existence, and while Tina looked, the room became dark as if some one had suddenly blown out the light.

"I wonder who is in there with the strange man?" cried Tina. "And what are they doing together?"

She was answered in a singular manner.

The door opened and Mother Clutch re-entered. The little clock-watcher was about to spring toward her with an exclamation when she saw that her guardian was not alone.

Mother Clutch held up one hand in token of silence and when the man who was her companion, had entered, she carefully closed the door.

This man was a handsome, thin-faced person of five and thirty, and Tina thought his eyes were very piercing and almost fascinating.

"This is Mr. Fox, child," explained Mother Clutch. "I know him and he knows me, ha, ha! I went out to find him, to show him the hand on the wall in Mr. Mystery's room. Where is it? What, is the room dark?"

"Yes, that very hand which has no thumb drew the curtain and then put out the light—I'm quite sure it did," cried Tina. "The gentleman can see for himself that the room is dark."

The man turned to the window and looked toward the opposite window.

"That looks like ugly work, eh, Ford?" remarked Mother Clutch.

Whatever the man thought, he said nothing; but Tina looked at him, as if in a flash she had discovered that he was a detective—one of the men who give the criminals of New York no peace.

CHAPTER II.

JORAL THE SERPENT-SELLER.

IN another part of the city and many a square from the scene of the events we have just recorded lived a man who was wanted out of the immediate neighborhood by those who surrounded him.

This obnoxious person's name was Joral Jet. He had a dark face and two little Hindoo-like eyes that glittered like the orbs of the strange things in which he dealt.

Joral was a dealer in snakes; that is, he kept nearly all kinds of reptiles for sale, and now and then one of his pets would get away and create consternation throughout the neighborhood.

Some of these serpents were harmless and beautiful; others were beautiful without being so harmless. They were kept in wire and glass cages in the room where the man slept, and he fed them without the slightest fear, running his dark hand among them and even taking the deadliest from the cages.

Joral had come from India. He had been an inhabitant of America for ten years, and his trade had always been the handling of serpents.

No wonder the people who were forced to live near him wanted him to move away, and no wonder they killed every snake that escaped, despite the old man's assertions that they were harmless. Woe to the boar that sought their liberty and left the premises! Woe to the little green snakes, that were almost as thin as hairs, if they fell in the way of Joral's neighbors!

It was nine o'clock on the night we are dealing with when the door of the old Indian's den opened and a man looked in. The old man started up and smiled. Perhaps he had been looking for this particular customer, for he seemed to smile, if the movement of his dark lips could be construed into a smile; and, a minute later, he was sitting on the stool in the midst of his pets, watching his caller from the depths of his scintillant eyes.

"You're here yet, eh?" said the new-comer.

"I thought you had gone back?"

"After more snakes?" grinned Joral.

"Yes, or with all the money you need for the rest of your life."

"I don't go back. I like it here, mebbe."

"Oh, you do, eh? But, they don't want you here, I'm told. They would like to kill all your snakes—"

"They'll never do that! They don't know how to kill them and, then, they are afraid of the little ones."

The man, who was rather dark of face though not so dark as the serpent-seller, picked up a lamp that burned on a table and moved with it toward a row of cages. He held the light close to the wires and leaned forward.

In a moment there were a number of sharp hisses beyond the close-set bars, and half a dozen little heads with bead-like eyes faced him. They were flat-headed reptiles, with elongated eyes that seemed to get longer while they hissed, and when the man had eyed them for a few moments he turned to Joral and replaced the lamp.

"They're the deadly fellows, eh?" he asked.

"Yes. They are the ones that do the business."

"Better than the larger ones?"

"Of course."

"But you have larger ones that kill as effectively?"

Old Joral smiled. Then he picked up the lamp and moved to one corner of the room. In a moment he took up a small cage and came back with it dangling from his hand.

"This is another lot of the killers!" he remarked, setting the cage on his knees while he turned the front of it toward the light.

"Why, they're asleep, Joral."

The old Indian ran his fingers across the bars and all at once something was lifted in one corner of the cage; then a dozen little things wriggled forward and shot out their red tongues, even sticking them out of the cage and in dangerous proximity to Joral's head.

"These are the sleepers," he went on, glancing up at his visitor who had drawn off frightened.

"Do they ever fail?"

Jet shook his head amusedly.

"That's the sort I want, Joral; but, at the same time I want the proof."

The cage was transferred from the old man's lap to the table and he brought forward a cage of guinea-pigs. Running his hand inside this cage, he pulled out a spotted fellow and held him a moment in the light.

"You shall see. The proof is here," he said, opening a little door in the top of the cage of snakes.

In a second the innocent pig had fallen into the cage and old Joral caught up the light.

"Now look, and your eyes must be quick," he cried. "See the little rascal in the corner. He has sighted the pig. Now he comes forward to kiss it. See how the green shines on his head and how the yellow lines lengthen under his eyes."

Joral's visitor seemed to be fascinated by the crawl of the serpent upon its victim. It came forward slowly and the guinea-pig, as if expecting death, retreated to the darkest corner of the cage where it tried to bury itself underneath the few straws there.

"Look now! The snake is at the pig. It has struck and the little thing is dead!"

"Not already, Joral?"

There was no reply, for the hand of the serpent-seller had opened the door and was inside the cage. In another second the pig was snatched out and placed in the man's hand.

"Dead it is!" cried that person. "Why, death must have been instantaneous."

"It came quicker than thought comes," was the reply.

The man looked at the dead guinea-pig and then laid it on the table.

"Are all of them deadly?"

"All of them," echoed Joral.

"And you will sell me the preventive of death?"

The old man looked at his customer a moment and then said:

"It is yours on the oath."

"I'll take it. Where is the antidote?"

"There is no antidote. What I sell simply renders the person who takes it proof against the bite of the little things."

"Very well; that's what I want. Where is it?"

Jet held out his hand.

"Where is the pay?" he asked.

"Oh, money down or no sale, is that it? Well, you certainly know how to make yourself solid."

The hand of the Indian did not move until a roll of bills had been placed in it. Then he withdrew to the table where he counted the money, after which he looked up and thrust the package into the pocket of his gown.

"You are to bring the little one back," he remarked.

"I'm to bring it back, am I? Well, if I do will I get some of my money back, at the same time?"

"No money returned."

"All right, then. We won't quarrel about it. I'm eager to get out of here. Where is the preservative? The snake, I see it. I want the other."

Old Joral opened a door curiously set in the wall where no door was to be seen and pulled out besides a bottle, a little greenish sack not unlike an old-fashioned money purse.

He poured some of the liquid in the vial into a smaller one and turned to the cage. It did not take him long to dive his hand among the serpents and snatch out one which he transferred to the green sack, after which he drew the mouth of the latter taut and threw it beside the vial.

"There you are," said he.

"Life and death, eh?"

"You are right—life and death."

"When do I take the stuff?"

"Just before you let the snake loose," was the reply.

"All of it?"

"All of it," and Joral eyed the bottle as if he was making sure that he had poured out the proper dose.

The stranger reached out and took up the vial. He held it between him and the lamp and Joral might have noticed that the hand which clutched the little vial had no thumb!

If he did, he kept the observation to himself and the vial went into an inside pocket as the man gingerly picked up the bag containing the serpent.

"It's not heavy—not as heavy as one of your boas would be," he remarked with a smile. "But I don't know but that I'd sooner carry one of the others."

"And have every bone in your body crushed?" suggested the old Indian.

"Not just yet. But, how shall I carry this thing?"

He was trying to carry the serpent as lightly as he could, and seemed to repent of the bargain. Joral came to his rescue and put the dangerous thing in his coat pocket while the man still eyed it with fear.

"You take the elixir before you take the serpent out," admonished Joral. "Drink all the fluid and wait till you feel a fire in your blood. Then you will be all right and you can handle the little one without fear."

"That's good. It renders me serpent proof, does it?"

"The venom of a thousand little fellows would not harm you while the fire is in the blood. You will be safe for twenty-four hours, in which time you will bring the snake back."

"Yes," said the man, speaking as it seemed through his set teeth. "I'll bring it back."

Joral Jet fell back on the stool and shut his blinking eyes.

He was the sole occupant of the den now, for the customer had taken his departure and the serpents had ceased to hiss in the cages. The boas were lying in coils in one corner of their large cage and the rattlers and cobras were odd-looking heaps of tangled cords in their dens.

The old serpent-seller—that man who cared not what life went out so long as he could make a dollar by getting rid of his infamous commodity—dozed in the chamber of dreadful death.

The light threw his shadow on the wall behind him and the boas now and then opened their eyes as if to make sure that they were still guarded by the old keeper who had imported them from their native jungles.

Midnight came and Joral slept.

Sometimes he slept thus, on the stool, preferring it to his couch under the serpent cage, and while he dozed his spine seemed as rigid as a rod of steel.

One would believe that the old dealer did not have many customers, but he had. He sold to shows and museums, though the managers of such establishments cared little to deal with the Hindoo; his snakes were too deadly for them, though, for the proper amount of money, he would rob them of their fangs.

It was nearly morning when Joral opened his eyes. He was still the occupant of the stool, and when he looked at the cages he saw that their inmates were stirring as if they knew that day was near at hand.

All at once the door opened and closed.

Something fell at Joral's feet and he started toward it with a little cry.

The object moved, stretched itself toward the old man, and seemed to eye him curiously.

"The little fellow!" cried Joral. "I wonder how he got out of the cage."

He picked up the greenish serpent which was crawling toward his stool, and dextrously holding it firmly just behind the head, he looked into its mouth which opened, as it were, for inspection.

Then he went to the cage where its mates were and counted them.

"I sold one last night and another the night before," he said audibly. "There are seven in the cage, the number I had after selling the last one. Now which one has come home—the one sold last night or the other one?"

He returned to the cage the snake which had come back and ran to the hall door. Opening it, he sprang down the steps which led to the street and caught sight of a man who was seen for a moment in the light of the nearest lamp.

"I thought so!" ejaculated the old Indian.

"It is he of the thumbless hand!"

Then he returned to his deadly pets, shutting the door behind him.

CHAPTER III.

A LOST NUMBER COMES TO LIGHT.

FORD FOX, the man picked up by Mother Clutch, had a good record as a mystery-sifter.

Young in years, just past thirty-five, he had seen a good deal of shadow work and had established for himself an enviable record as an independent detective. Always on the alert, with the capacity to catch the full import of a clue at the moment of finding it, he had secured the best results, and at the time of the opening of our story, he was a prince of the trail, a sure clue-finder, whose courage had never been tested in vain.

What he heard from the lips of little Tina made him anxious to open the door of the room across the narrow space between the two houses. He looked at the curtained window and wondered if it did not shut in some dark secret,

and hold in its mysterious grasp the clue which would send some one to the gallows or State Prison.

The detective proceeded to the window and raised the sash.

He seemed to mentally measure the distance between the two houses and all at once turned to Mother Clutch who was watching him like a hawk.

"So you don't know much about the man over there?" he queried.

"We call him 'Mr. Mystery'—that's about all we know," was the reply, as the woman looked at the child. "Tina has tried to talk to him, but he would have nothing to say, though the little one did all in her power to get him to converse."

The ferret found in the closet of the room occupied by Mother Clutch and Tina a rope which he made fast to the stanch bedpost. Then he threw the other end of the rope across the space and looped it over an iron bar attached to the sill—a bar which had been placed there for some purpose unknown.

After trying the rope and bar, the detective swung himself out into space and began to approach the window of the opposite house, hand over hand.

It was an undertaking anxiously watched by the two left behind, and when they saw him clutch the sill and steady himself a moment, the little girl gave vent to an exclamation of joy.

Ford Fox drew himself up on the sill, and, by reaching up along the sash, succeeded in lifting his feet to the sill. Standing upon it, he could look over the curtain and down into the room beyond.

The shadower steadied himself on the sill and tried to make out the interior of the room, but all was dark. Not a sound came from the place, and after awhile he stooped and lifted the sash.

"Look! he's lifting the sash!" cried Tina, clasping her hands. "He is going into the room."

"He's the last man to keep out of suspected places. I know him!" was Mother Clutch's reply.

Already the detective was half-way inside; then the two watchers saw him spring into the apartment and vanish.

"He's struck a light!" cried Tina.

So he had. Ford Fox had struck a lucifer on the wall and was holding the little torch above his head while he strained his eyes to see what surrounded him.

For a little while he saw nothing, but, all at once, the outlines of a human figure came out of the maze and he discovered a man lying on the floor as if he had fallen from the chair where his feet rested. This man lay on his back with his face turned toward the dark ceiling and his hands half open on the floor on either side.

That he was dead was certain from the ferret's first glance. The death stare was in his wide-open eyes and rigidity had already set in.

The dead man and the detective were the only tenants of the place.

So far as he could see, nothing had been overturned and no struggle had preceded the last act of life.

In all probability the man had fallen dead from the chair.

Ford Fox thought of the hand which little Tina had seen on the wall and later at the curtain. He looked toward the wall, leaning forward, and saw there confirmation of the child's story.

The imprint of a hand was on the white plastering—a hand larger than the detective's own. Every finger was traceable, but, where was the thumb?

Had this hand—the hand of the unknown murderer—no thumb? The four fingers had left their mark on the wall—left it in ghastly red; but the thumb was missing, as if it had not touched the spot or had been held back from design.

That bloody imprint on the wall for a moment drew the detective from the dead man on the floor. He examined the hand; he even placed his own over the impress and saw that the fingers were larger than his and that the stain was surely that of human blood!

He recalled how Tina had seen the man place his hand on the wall, and seemed to hear her say that she saw him slouch across the room, suddenly throw up his hand and make that dread mark there, as if in fear of something that seemed to be at his feet, or near on the floor.

Fox now turned again to the dead. He lighted a lamp, and, almost forgetting the anxious pair in the house across the way, he bent over the body. He had already seen that the dead man was past middle age and that he had long hands and a thin face seamed with deep lines.

But, something more than this startled the ferret. He discovered that blood had flowed from a wound which had escaped his notice. He saw that it had soaked into the floor, but not, perhaps, before the hand which had touched the wall had dyed itself with it.

"It can't be that I have at last found the man who has been a police mystery for twenty years," thought the man of trails. "If I have discovered Hiram Harkness, or Number 99, as

he is called, my night adventure has already been worth something."

He opened the shirt of the dead man and looked at the white skin over the heart.

"Something has been taken off here," he cried. "There is a scar where the tattoo should have been and— We'll look at the arm next."

He bared the right arm nearly to the elbow, pulling the sleeves back and then uttered another exclamation.

"Another scar where the second tattoo should be! This man is Number 99! This man is the person who vanished from the police twenty years ago and for whom all the sharps of two continents have hunted in vain. I have seen his portrait so often—I have studied it even, and— Yes, this is Hiram Harkness!"

So the man had a name at last. So "Mr. Mystery" was somebody, but not discovered until after death. He had lived in that little room for more than a year, as Mother Clutch could testify; he had watched Tina from the window and had heard the striking of the clock as if it was the only music he cared about.

The wound seemed to be back of the head, and Ford Fox looked at it to see a cut nearly an inch in length, but not deep enough to have caused death.

He was surgeon enough to see that no arteries had been severed; but, all the same, the man was dead.

It was not suicide. The detective scouted that idea as he stood erect, with a new mystery confronting him. He began to look through the room, but found nothing. If anything had been taken he could not discover what it was. The fugitive must have destroyed all evidence of his identity, or else the murderer had done that for him.

There was absolutely nothing for the investigator to get hold of. He was sure he had found Hiram Harkness, and that he had found him dead; but, that was all.

After nearly an hour's stay in the room he swung himself out of the window and went back to Mother Clutch and little Tina.

"Well?" asked the old woman.

"There's a dead man over there—"

"Mr. Mystery?" broke in the child.

"Yes."

"I thought so, for what was the Thumbless Hand doing yonder if something wicked was not taking place? Was he killed?"

Ford Fox turned to Tina and laid his hand on her arm.

"You needn't ask Mother Clutch to send me to bed for fear I'd dream of murder," broke in the little one. "I was acquainted with Mr. Mystery—that is, we used to stand at the windows and look at one another; but we never said much, for he didn't care to talk. He was murdered, wasn't he?"

"Yes," answered Ford Fox. "A murder has been committed."

"And you saw the hand on the wall?"

"It is there."

"But it has no thumb?"

"You were right; it has no thumb."

Tina, at a look from Mother Clutch, went to the window and stood there, and the detective and the woman withdrew to the furthest corner of the room. The child was obedient, and, then, something seemed to draw her toward that place where death ruled and where a murder mystery which was not yet ended, had sprung into existence.

"You have lived in New York a long time, Mother Clutch?" suggested the ferret.

"Sixty years."

"You have kept a run of the prominent events?"

"I've tried to, but they slip from me as I grow older."

"What was the talk of the town about twenty years ago?"

Mother Clutch's face became at once a profound study.

"Do you mean in society? I was 'in the swim' then?" and the old woman smiled as the words escaped her.

"Yes, I mean in society. Think a moment, Mother Clutch. Go back in memory twenty years and recall the most exciting thing that stirred the city then."

"Ah! I know what it was. I have it now. It was the vanishing of Hiram Harkness."

"You are right. He was arrested for a dark crime. He went up the river, but he didn't stay there long."

"No, he escaped. He went away like a vapor and the papers were full of it for weeks. I remember how every man-hunter, stimulated by the five thousand dollars' reward, looked high and low for him—how they even took up trails that led them across the water. It was the talk of New York then, and it lasted for a long time. I believe they lost every clue they picked up, but you should have been a detective then, Mr. Fox. Ah, he wouldn't have eluded you!"

The ferret smiled at the compliment but his face suddenly went back to its immobile look.

"Did you ever see Hiram Harkness, Mother Clutch?" he asked.

"Often; but it was before they tried and sent him up."

"Well, you wouldn't know him now."

Instantly the face of the woman changed.

"I wouldn't know him now? What do you mean?" she demanded.

"He is over in that room."

"Not the old Hiram who got out of Sing Sing! Not the man whom the papers called Number 99?"

"The same man."

"I would like to see him."

"Come, then; you shall see him," cried Ford Fox. "We will leave Tina here while we go to the scene of death by the true route. I believe we can get to the place by the regular stairs."

"I'm sure of it."

Patient little Tina looked anxious, but she did not demur to the arrangement which Mother Clutch made, and the old woman and Ford Fox left the house.

They found no trouble in reaching the room occupied by the dead man; the door was unlocked, and when the detective lit the lamp and held it over the corpse, a strange cry came from Mother Clutch.

"This man is Hiram Harkness!" she exclaimed.

They searched the room together and all at once the skinny hand of the woman pounced upon something which she held up with a grin.

"Look at this, Mr. Fox! If I was a girl back among the hills of Jersey I'd call it a bit of a snake's tail."

Ford Fox took the shiny thing from the withered hand and went to the light.

"That is just what it looks like, Mother Clutch!" he assented; it is the tip of a serpent's tail.

CHAPTER IV.

OLD JORAL SPEAKS HIS MIND.

JORAL, the serpent-merchant, was quite sure that one of the snakes had come home.

When he had returned from looking at the man whom he had declared was the owner of the thumbless hand, he discovered a drop of blood on the floor and then another near the cage where he had placed the serpent.

Curious to see what this meant, the old man opened the lid in the top of the little box and reaching in, selected the snake which had been returned and carried it to the light. There he made a discovery which drew from him a cry of astonishment, for the little wriggler was minus the tip of its tail, and while the old Indian examined it, his eyes glittered and he seemed to smile to himself.

"Looks to me like it was ground off by a heel," said he under his breath. "I don't see how this could be unless the little one was crawling in some one's road. Lost your tail, ha? Well, I would like to see the wretch who took it!"

Old Joral replaced the little reptile in the box and went over to the larger ones which were uncoiling themselves in the first warm beams of the morning sun. Day had come again and the den was resuming its old life.

Suddenly Joral fell back and leaned against the wall near the door.

One of his hands went to his forehead and he appeared to fall into a train of thought which must have carried him back some years in his life.

"The hand without the thumb! I have seen it before!" cried he. "Yes, it crossed paths before last night and it has crossed mine among others. Why did its owner come to me for the snake? What did he want to do with the little one? I sold him the elixir of life as well as the poison. He went off with both and near day he comes back with the death-dealer. It is strange, and, then, the little one is brought home minus its tail! Snakes cannot talk, else this one should tell old Joral the story of its adventures. Ah! won't the papers tell me something if murder has been done?"

Joral Jet did that morning something he had not done for years. He bought a number of morning papers and read them while the snakes hissed and writhed in their cages. He looked up one column and down the other, running his shrewd eyes everywhere in hopes of finding a clue to the mystery he was after. But he found nothing. He looked where he thought he would discover something about the sudden death of some person, but the papers reported nothing of the kind, and he threw the last one away in disgust.

"But I will find out!" declared the old man. "He will not come again if the snake did the work for him; but, I won't let him get away. I want that man's secret and I will not stop short of getting it."

By and by the old man slipped out into the street. While not in the habit of going abroad, he seemed to know the windings of the thoroughfares, for he flitted hither and thither, and at last turned up in front of a well-to-do house in a respectable portion of the city.

Joral had so disguised himself that he would not have been recognized by the majority of his customers, and when he rung the bell he stepped into the vestibule as if he was very desirous of concealing himself from prying eyes.

The door was opened by a maid, who invited the snake-seller inside and he was ushered into a handsome parlor, the floor of which was covered with oriental rugs.

With a smile which seemed to brighten his little eyes, Joral dropped into the depths of an arm-chair and waited for some one to come.

Presently the door opened and he found himself face to face with a man who looked at him with some show of amazement.

The old snake-seller was twining his long fingers about one another and watching, as it seemed, the play of early light and shadow on the wall which he faced.

"Well, sir, you are here again?" said the man, almost haughtily.

"I am here," answered Joral, meekly.

"You chose daylight for your visit, I see."

"It is important."

"I presume you couldn't have selected another hour? I suppose you had to compromise me by coming at this hour?"

For a moment there was no reply, the serpent-merchant sitting silent with the long, suggestive fingers uncoiling like some of his snakes.

"What is it?"

Joral had noticed that the speaker had shut the door carefully and that he had glided to his chair and was standing near him with a very anxious cast of countenance, as if he felt that the visit was one of importance.

"I think it is enough to bring me to your house. I have seen him again."

The listener started.

"You have seen whom? You are not very definite."

Joral turned to the man a faced dark and full of eagerness. The long fingers separated and one hand was placed on the white man's arm.

"I have seen the man who has no thumb!"

"You have? And is this what brings you to my house? Do you come hither to tell me that your eyes have fallen upon a man thus deformed? Why, there may be a thousand men without thumbs."

"We have known but one," was the quick reply.

"Well? What has he done?"

Joral shook his head.

"You don't know, eh? You come here and tell me you have seen this man, yet you don't know what he has done. Why, don't you know, man?"

"Because I wasn't out last night. I don't know whither he went; I had to remain at home with the little ones."

"With your infernal snakes, I suppose? Why didn't you let them take care of themselves for awhile? You should have tracked this man if he is the thumbless person we want."

"He is the man!" declared Joral, emphatically.

"And you let him get away? When did you make this discovery?"

"Last night."

"Where? Did you run across him on the street? Or, did he have the hardihood to visit you?"

Joral seemed to sink into the back of his chair.

At that moment the door opened and there stood before him, looking at him out of a pair of deep-blue eyes as soft as the skies of summer, a beautiful young girl.

She was clad in a morning gown which hung gracefully round her willowy figure, and her face, which was full and white, was so beautiful that Joral Jet could not take his eyes from it.

"You here, Edna?" the man of the house exclaimed. "I did not hear you enter."

The girl did not move, but with her eyes riveted upon the occupant of the chair, she advanced toward the caller.

"Who is this man, papa?" she said. "Why, he is not a negro. I thought at first he was; but I see now that his skin is not black. He looks like an East Indian—like one of those jugglers we saw last summer on the beach."

The white teeth of Jet were shown in the smile with which he greeted this speech.

"This man is an East Indian," said the person whom she had addressed. "I found him in the parlor when I came. I have a slight acquaintance with him and—"

"With this man?" interrupted the girl. "It can't be, papa? Where did you ever meet him? When you were abroad?"

"Perhaps," was the impatient answer. "He is here on a little matter of business and will be gone in a few moments. If you will retire, dear, I will join you presently. There, that is a good little girl."

Still watching Joral, as if his eyes fascinated her, Edna slowly walked from the room. As the door closed behind her, the man sprang at the serpent-seller and clutched his shoulder almost viciously.

"You see what you have done!" he exclaimed. "You have alarmed Edna whose health is none of the best just now. In the name of Heaven, man, why didn't you send me word that you wanted to see me?"

Old Joral was gazing at the door through which the girl had made her exit, and did not appear to hear the words of rebuke.

"She's devilish pretty," said he, unconsciously

speaking above a whisper. "Is she your child, major?"

"Of course she's my child," was the answer. "Edna is beautiful, but this is no time to discuss that."

"Why don't you get a rich husband for her?"

The face of the listener reddened. His hand which had fallen from the Indian's shoulder, caught it again and the fingers seemed to sink into his flesh.

"Look here!" he cried. "Transact your business with me and go back to your snakes. Edna will get a husband when she wants one. She will get the best there is in the market."

"A rich one, eh?"

"Of course. You don't suppose I'd let her wed a beggar, do you? Now, what were you saying about this man with the missing thumb? Where did you say you saw him?"

"He came to see me last night; he came for one of the little fellows."

"One of your snakes?"

Old Joral nodded.

"Did you sell him a serpent?"

"I did. I took his money—"

"And sold him one of your life-takers? Why, man, don't you know that you are carrying your business a little too far in this country?"

"I can't tell what they do with the snakes after they buy them. I can't be expected to follow them wherever they go. I sell them and they who buy are responsible. I want to get their money, and when they have parted with it and have my snakes, why, I don't care what they do."

"You sold the man without the thumb one of your snakes, did you?" the white man said slowly. "Did he bring it back?"

"It came back this morning."

"And you looked at its fangs?"

"Yes."

"Well, what did you discover there?"

"It had bitten. The little one had bitten, I say; but he came back minus the tip of his tail."

"Better than that its head, in a business point of view," laughed Joral's companion. "You could get nothing for a snake without its head."

The old Indian did not smile.

"She is pretty," he suddenly said. "And you say she is your child, major?"

In an instant the man of the house pounced upon the old Indian and he was jerked from the chair as if a giant had clutched him.

"Enough of this!" he cried; "I will not have you referring to the young girl. When you can come to me on purely a business mission, without any insulting assumption, I will listen."

"But, she's pretty. I'd like to marry Edna," grinned Joral, and the major fell back, as if shocked by an electric battery.

And while he looked, speechless, the snake-seller walked out of the house.

CHAPTER V.

THE OATH TO BAFFLE.

"You'd like to marry her, would you? You'd like to make that beautiful creature your wife, you infamous old wretch! I will see to this. I don't care what our relations have been in the past, nor what they may be now; but you shall never accomplish your purpose if you have laid it bare this morning. I will see to that myself. I will see that you fail despite the secrets you hold, and the allies you have in your den. You Edna's husband? By heavens, I'd kill the girl first!"

At this moment the door opened and the subject of Joral's passion came in, paler than before, and with her eyes riveted upon the man who stood in the middle of the room.

"What is that man?" she cried advancing, but stopping suddenly as she saw the light that flared his eyes. "He stopped at the door and gazed at me on the stairs with the eyes of a serpent. There was something so alluring and fascinating about those eyes of his that I felt a strange feeling steal over me, and if he had not glided from the house when he did, I believe I should have gone down to him, ready to become his slave. Don't let that man ever come back to this house."

"He shall not, child! He shall never darken the doorway of this house again."

"What business can he have with you? I did not know this city had such a citizen."

"It has in it all classes of people; it would be strange if it hadn't, you know."

"But this man? He is an Indian, you say, and you met him years ago while you were abroad?"

There was no reply for a moment. The two stood together and the hand of the man was resting lightly on the girl's shoulder. Her eyes were upturned to him and he saw a shudder sweep over her frame while she regarded him with blanched cheeks.

"You were on the staircase you say, Edna?" he asked.

"Yes—"

"You weren't listening, I hope?"

"No, papa, I did not listen. I can hardly tell why I stopped there, only I know that I did not hear what passed between you and that man. I never want to hear any of your business, and

I stood there, I suppose, fearing that he might try to injure you."

"He won't do that," said Major Rubio. "He will never try to harm me, that man won't."

"That assurance takes a load from my mind. I could go to sleep now and dream of all things peaceful. He won't harm you, papa? Ah, that is nice."

Edna held her face in a position for a kiss and the lips of the man who was handsome dropped till they touched her soft skin and a kiss was imprinted.

Then she glided from the parlor, kissing her hand to him at the door and he stood for a moment longer where she had left him with his hands shut and a wild, determined look in his eye.

"I lied to her, but that will be forgiven," he said to himself. "I could not look into the eyes of that fair creature and tell her the truth. I would not do it for the world. That man is dangerous. His last remark tells me so and he will follow up the infamous thought that burns in his brain. I must see that he is rendered powerless. I will strike now!"

But instead of quitting the room, he sat down and looked toward the curtained window like one suddenly deprived of power. He seemed to have been disarmed by some unseen hand, and for fully ten minutes he did not stir, but filled the chair while the house grew as silent as the grave.

The sound that startled him at last was the clear tinkle of the door-bell.

He listened while he heard the feet of the maid in the hall and when she came into the room with a letter in her hand, he turned to her and took it mechanically.

Glancing at the superscription he parted a heavy silk curtain at one side of the apartment and sat down before a desk in a smaller chamber.

With a paper knife he opened the envelope and pulled out a half sheet across which were several lines which drove the last vestige of color from his face.

He did not seem to breathe while he read the lines. Life appeared to go out with the effort put forth, and for a moment he leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes as if to shut out the sight of some appalling catastrophe.

"Dead? Murdered?" he cried. "Found out—hunted down at last! And a detective at the skein of crime? This is terrible!"

At last he looked again at the letter and read for the third time the words on the sheet.

These ran as follows:

"Number 99 was found dead in his room, last night by a man who is now at work on the case. He was killed—99 was—and the body is now at the dead house where it has been identified. A word to the wise is sufficient. Come and see me."

"HAGAR."

The signature was not needed to tell that the writer of the brief missive was a woman. The shape of the letters, the manner of forming them—everything, in fact—told him it had come from a woman's hand.

"You want to see me?" he said. "I would like to know how you discovered this so soon. Found dead in his room—discovered, perhaps, by the old fox who is already on the trail. I wonder who did it? I wonder how the person who killed Number 99 discovered where he was? But I will know. I will see you, Hagar, and that immediately."

He buried the letter in his pocket and moved not until he seemed as calm as ever.

When he left the house he was watched from the window by an anxious face and Edna walked across the room when he was gone and parted the silk curtains.

Meantime Major Rubio was walking down the street through the cool shadows of morning, for the day had not advanced far and the shades prevailed where the buildings were tall.

By and by he took a car and at last alighted some distance from the starting point. A row of houses stood before him and he walked up the steps in front of one and rung the bell.

Half a minute later he stood in the presence of Hagar.

The owner of this name was a woman who looked just the person to bear it. She was tall and handsome, with a dark face which would have reminded the reader of a person raised in the Orient, and on her hands were rings in which glittered precious stones in abundant profusion.

This woman who was still young, though she might have reached the thirty-fifth milestone of life, smiled when Major Rubio crossed the threshold of the room in which she awaited him.

"You got the letter?" she said.

"Yes. It nearly threw me from my chair. Is it true?"

"Nothing can be truer. He is dead!"

"Found dead, you tell me?"

"Found dead and, what is more, by a man who is calculated to give trouble. He was discovered by a detective and, from what I know, one of the shrewdest in the city."

"Who told you all this, Hagar? It is not in the newspapers, for I looked them over after breakfast. I am very careful; you know why,

and I am quite sure there was nothing of this discovery in them."

"The crime was discovered too late for them. It wasn't found out until past midnight, and then you know the reporters couldn't get hold of it."

"But you did?"

He was watching her closely and his eyes were eager and full of life.

"Yes, I found it out," she answered, slowly.

"I ran across the secret and it was all mine until I wrote you."

"But the detective had it, it seems."

"Oh, yes, he and perhaps one or two others knew of the murder, but outside of these it was a secret which belonged to me."

"And to the—to the slayer of Number 99," smiled Major Rubio.

Hagar looked up at him and a moment seemed to make a study of his face.

"If this shadower is as shrewd as he might be, something might come out of this crime—something which might operate against us."

"I have foreseen this," was the quick answer. "I was thinking of that coming down in the car. I see where we are if this man is shrewder than his colleagues. Do you know anything about him?"

"I know that his name is Ford Fox; I know, too, that he has a good record and that when he finds a clue he never lets up until he has traced it out to the end. This man is young, agile and full of eagerness to shine in his profession. This, with his coolness, makes him a dangerous man. He is on the trail now—that is, he has discovered Number 99—the man whose escape from Sing Sing twenty years ago was the nine days' wonder of the world. You remember he vanished, as if the river had received him."

"Yes, yes."

"You know, too, that at the same time his child, a babe, disappeared almost as mysteriously as the parent. Well, the mystery of that man's vanishment has never been solved, but you and I, major, have been aware for months that he was in this very city—that he was not dead as the police have thought; but that he occupied a certain room under another name, hiding like a hunted beast. Now that he is dead—murdered—by some unknown hand, and the detectives are after that hand, we are not safe. Why, the mystery-sifter may uncover another chapter in the history. You know, major!"

Major Rubio, his face white and his lips quivering, suddenly braced up.

"I see the danger," said he. "I realize it at every point. This man must fail!"

"Even though the murderer goes unwhipped of justice?"

"Yes."

"I thought you would decide thus. When I sent for you I had fully made up my mind that you would say this. It is the only play left us. I know not who killed Number 99; but this human ferret must never get to the end of the skein."

Major Rubio listened and for some time said nothing.

Hagar, watching like a hawk, seemed to smile now and then as though she could pierce his thoughts and read them like an open book.

"You are right. He shall not succeed! From this day that man is fated. He will find at all corners the baffling hand; he must discover that the hand of doom is against him, and that the sooner he gives up this hunt the sooner he will be entirely safe. Dead is the man we have seen hiding from the police. This man has kept out of the clutches of the law for twenty years. Ever since the walls of Sing Sing opened to let him out he has been a lost man, but you and I, Hagar, have known where he crouched, in the little den, scarcely ever coming out in the light of day."

"Ford Fox has a sharer of the secret. He went to the den with a woman; but she will give us no trouble."

"What does she call herself?" asked Major Rubio.

"Mother Clutch is well known in certain parts of the city and while she is that ferret's friend, she will not help him much."

"You know Mother Clutch?"

"I know the woman!" said Hagar. "But let me see to her, major. Let me take care of Mother Clutch."

Major Rubio arose and stood before Hagar, the Dark, and his hands were held out to her.

"Why not swear that this detective shall never reach the end of his present trail?" cried he. "Why not in this, your home, Hagar, take an oath to baffle him."

"I am ready. We will take the oath, major."

They did so. In the seclusion of the room in which she had received her visitor, Hagar, the Dark, followed him through the dreadful oath which his lips spake and they swore together that Ford Fox, the keen detective, should never see the end of the trail of the missing thumb.

Yet, up to this moment not a word about the person who might have taken Number 99's life.

Not a sentence had passed between them concerning the hand which had left its dread impress on the wall of Number 99's den.

Did they suspect? Did Major Rubio and his

companion know whose hand wanted a thumb, and whose vengeance had come down upon the escaped convict, blotting out the life he had been shielding from the grip of the authorities?

Let our story answer.

CHAPTER VI.

THE WARNING.

THE finding of the body of the long missing man under the circumstances which have already been described, startled the whole city and revived interest in the old crime for which Number 99 had been tried and convicted.

Again the whole story which thousands had entirely forgotten was retold in the newspapers, and the city read about the man who had lived a double life in New York, hiding from the bounds of the law and now and then passing them on the streets.

Hiram Harkness had committed a crime which was dark and brutal.

He was a man well known in certain circles as a person of good address and honesty. He had a niece whose fortune, left by her father, had been placed in his hands for her and it was his duty to see that it made money for her.

No one would have suspected him of being other than a man without guile; no one would have dreamed that instead of bringing more money into his niece's coffers, he was spending it as fast as he could and that, lured by the siren speculation, he was wasting it day by day.

When he followed his theft by turning incendiary and applying the match to the house in which his niece lived, the whole city awoke to the terrible discovery that it had harbored a wretch in disguise and that Hiram Harkness was one of the greatest of villains.

His arrest and trial followed the last act in the drama of deceit. He was apprehended almost with the match in his hand, and there was no escape for him. His wife, dead a few months, could not feel the disgrace, and the babe she had left behind was too young to realize the degradation which its father had heaped upon it.

Hiram Harkness faced the court with the brazen face of an accomplished villain. He even laughed when the sentence was passed upon him and refused to see his child before he was taken off to wear the stripes of a criminal for twenty years. But he did not wear them long.

Mysteriously the doors of the prison opened to him and one morning his cell was found to be empty. He was at large again, and from the moment of his escape he vanished as suddenly and completely as snow disappears from the warm hillside. All search prove fruitless. The man's crime had roused the whole country; it had created wide-spread indignation in Europe, and the best human bloodhound of the old world tried to run him down.

A reward large enough to tempt the best man-hunters was offered for his recapture, but he was gone, and the clues which the detectives thought they had struck turned out to be worthless, and in time they gave up the hunt, saying that no doubt the scoundrel had made way with himself, thus robbing the prison of one of its legitimate tenants.

Almost at the very moment of Harkness's escape the child vanished, too. The little one which had been taken by a woman who had promised to raise it, disappeared and all traces of it were lost from the moment of the theft.

Now all this came out as the newspapers told how Hiram Harkness had come to the surface after twenty years of hiding, had come forward as a mystery of crime, having been found dead by Ford Fox, the detective, in the den which he had inhabited, perhaps ever since the mysterious escape from Sing Sing.

There was no doubt of the identity of the dead man.

The scars on bosom and arm which showed that certain marks which he wore at the time of his trial had been taken off by some severe means, still further fixed his identity and, as if these marks were not enough, a short finger settled the whole matter.

Ford Fox stood over the body in the morgue and heard the comments which those who looked at it passed upon it. The public had become incensed again; it had reviewed the crime of twenty years back, and would have brought Number 99 back to life for the sole purpose of wreaking on him the full sentence of the law.

The detective stood there a long time and watched the constant stream that passed the place where the body lay. All classes brushed him, but did not know that the cool detective was watching for the hand which came not, and that his eyes were on the alert for the figure which little Tina had seen cross the floor of Hiram Harkness's den.

It was the night after this vigil at the morgue when the ferret sat in his room alone.

The clock on the shelf back of his chair was near the stroke of ten, and he had been trying to put together some things which he had heard from the lips of Mother Clutch.

Mother Clutch was a woman who had changed her name more than once. She had not managed to escape the police altogether, but had felt the

hand of the iron grip more than once during her life.

She had lived with the lowest and had moved in good circles. Her life had been more than two-sided; she had seen the lights and shadows of city life, and had heard the jingle of gold and the sound of poverty's pebbles.

Mother Clutch had so well concealed her identity that but few knew that she was the woman who had taken little Ruby Harkness to raise after the crimes of her father. But few knew this, we say. The nosing reporters knew nothing of it, and some of the accounts of the crime of Number 99 told how the woman who had taken the child had died with grief after the theft, and others spun stories about her suicide at one of the docks.

Mother Clutch was not the person to do either. She clung to life with a tenacity which was commendable, and with little Tina was occupying the room, from whose one window she had seen Hiram Harkness more than once without dreaming that she had been connected with his evil life.

Ford Fox heard the footsteps that came up his steps and looking up waited for the maker of them to enter.

But, though the sounds came to his door, no knock sounded and he went back to his work.

Presently, however, something fell on the floor and he saw lying almost within reach of his hand a letter which he picked up while the footsteps receded and finally went down the stairs.

The ferret had received several messages by the same route, the transom. He turned back to the table and broke the seal of the one which had just come.

A dirty envelope and a crumpled sheet of paper! There was a foul odor of tobacco about the sheet and the detective put it to his nostrils a moment before he tried to master its contents.

"I would like to see you as soon as you can come to me," he read. "I have had another dream, more curious than the last one, and I think it will be the last one I will ever have for it has left me very weak. Besides this, I have seen the old man who sells snakes and he wants me to tell him what I dream. I am afraid of this man and, if you will, I wish you would come at once to me. I send this by Jerry, the little fellow who drops in now and then." "W. W."

Ford Fox held the letter before him in the light and looked at it at arm's length. He seemed to eye it with a good deal of curiosity, for he turned it over and at last threw it upon the table.

A glance at the clock told him the time and he thrust the letter into a drawer in the table which he locked and then arose.

"You dream altogether too much for your own good, Mr. White," he exclaimed. "I don't see why the old serpent-seller should want to know your dreams. I'll see you; but I won't promise to believe all you may tell me."

He went down and started off at a brisk gait. The night was pleasant and the ferret was seen by many who did not discover his identity.

Arrived at the mouth of an alley which seemed to lose itself amid dense darkness, he plunged in and vanished. But not for long was he unseen, for Ford turned up in a little while in a room which was poorly lighted, but in one corner of which was to be seen the form of a man on a couch.

There was something strangely unnatural about the face of this man who might have been as young as thirty. That face was almost transparent. It was also thin as the face of a starved person and the mouth was closed as the sparkling eyes watched the detective with a weird light.

"Well, you got the letter Jerry took?" said the occupant of the couch in a voice which was almost a whisper.

"Yes; it fell upon my floor for the boy must have thrown it over the transom. You say you have been dreaming again?"

The young man coughed a little and moved his body nearer the edge of the bed.

"I have had another of those strange visions. I can't tell you how they come, but I do know that they sap my life as you can see and that the river ain't very far off any more. It was this morning and I was wide awake as I always am when they come to me. I was lying where you see me now and looking at the wall. Suddenly on the white surface appeared a man who stood outlined with all the distinctness of a drawing. He seemed to grow as I looked, and even to quit the wall, as if he had become endowed with life. What was he like? He was a man who was well dressed and handsome, but the eyes which I saw as distinctly as though they were in a living bead, were as bright as diamonds. I have seen him before. More than once in these nameless visions he has stood out as the evil genius of my life, and to-day he was as real as ever."

"For a little while he stood yonder and then he was joined by a woman who came from I know not where. She was nearly as tall as the man, but her face was darker than his and her fingers were covered with rings. I saw her, but not quite so plainly as her companion, perhaps because he has been with me oftener. They stood yonder on my wall until they advanced

from it and crossed the room. You may smile, as if you believe me out of my head or near the confines of another world with my liddle; but as I live, Ford Fox, man-hunter as I know you to be, those people stood yonder on my carpet and talked—actually talked."

The detective looked at the young man and for a moment waited for him to go on.

"But you heard nothing?" said he at length. "You did not hear them talk?"

"I heard them!" was the answer behind which the lips of the speaker closed with emphasis. "You are to be struck by this pair in crime. I heard them say that the man who is on the trail—that the detective called Ford Fox—is to be thrown from the scent by the hand which spares not. You look at me. I thought you would, but you have been warned from the world of mystery. It seems to me that I have looked into the future and seen there the inevitable—that with one foot in the waters of oblivion, I have been able to warn you of the impending hand, and to tell you that the man and woman who stepped from my wall have laid a plot for your destruction."

"Well, what did they say? Why am I to be hunted down and struck when I know it not?"

"What have you discovered within the last thirty-six hours?" said Winton White, the dreamer.

"A new crime."

"That is why! You have trenched on the safety of those people. You have crossed their path; you are to feel the hand of vengeance and, perhaps, the knife of death."

"Did you see the hands of those people? I mean, did you look at them while they talked yonder?"

"Nothing escaped me. I saw their hands. They were perfect; they had their thumbs."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I had a dream last night, one of those visions, and in it appeared a man who had no thumb at all. Now, those people were not thumbless. I looked at their hands to see if they were. The thumbless hand appeared to me at the dead of night when I was awake on this cot with my eyes looking into space. Remember, you have been warned from the unseen. I don't know what this crime is that you have discovered. I can't dream out that mystery."

"It is a murder!" said Ford Fox. "A man who has been in hiding twenty years has been killed and I am looking for the thumbless hand that did it."

"Well, you don't have to fear the thumbless hand so much as you do the others," was the response. "It is the blow from the perfect hand that you should look out for. They may be connected in some cabal of crime—the good hands and the thumbless one—I can't say how that is, but I heard the man and his mate say—even swear—that the detective shall never reach alive the end of this trail and that he is fated to perish this side the goal."

Winton White's face seemed to get a sudden shade and Ford Fox, bending over him, looked down into the eyes that shut and appeared to fade out as the lips of the strange dreamer again warned him to beware of the blow which had been prepared for him—a blow not to be dealt by the thumbless hand.

CHAPTER VII.

ANOTHER SHADOW ON THE CEILING.

THERE was something so startling in the dreamer and his dreams that the ferret of New York felt the spell which had come over him.

He had known Winton White, the dreamer, for more than a year. They had met by chance and about the time of the beginning of the unaccountable visions which had undoubtedly shortened the young man's life. He had faded as a flower before the detective, as if the spell of his nightmares had him in the grip of a demon, and when Ford Fox heard from the dreamer the story of the two persons who had come to him during one of his trances, he wondered if it would not be the last dream story to fall from the youth's lips.

When he left the room it was with the last warning ringing in his ears.

He was to be hunted down, not by the thumbless hand but by the cunning of the pair who had taken the oath to baffle him. He was to find the trail one of danger, if not of death, and the couple who had appeared to Winton White were to hunt him like wolves and at last render abortive all his efforts to discover the murderer of "Number 99."

He looked up at the window of the house which he left. He saw a light there and a white face pressed against the pane. That it was Winton White's face he well knew, and looking at it a moment, he turned away and hurried off.

In his pocket, wrapped in a bit of oiled silk and still further protected, the detective carried an odd-looking object which many people would not have recognized.

Mother Clutch, who had picked it up from the floor of Hiram Harkness's den, called it "a bit of a snake's tail," and it was nothing else, as an examination had proved.

This little thing was less than half an inch in length and the detective had looked at it a

hundred times and wondered by what means it had reached the scene of the mysterious crime.

On this particular night after quitting Winton White's room, he crossed half the city and at last looked into a dark alley down which eyes as keen as his would not let him see very far.

Dodging into this place, the ferret vanished, to come into the light at last in a room from one corner of which rose the form of a child, and little Tina stood revealed.

"Mother Clutch has been missing since yesterday," said Tina, "and I have been waiting for her ever since. She got a letter, looked at it and went off."

"Didn't she tell you where she was going, Tina?"

"Not a word," answered the child. "In fact, she never tells me any of her secrets, but I remember that she caught me up and kissed me, then went out without looking back, and that's the last I've seen of Mother Clutch."

Ford listened to this and stood silent half a minute.

"Did the letter come through the post?"

"Yes, sir. It was the first letter I've seen her get in a long while. She seemed to start while she read it, for I was watching her, and when she had finished it, she kissed me and was off."

"She took the letter with her, of course?"

"Oh, yes. I thought at first that she might have left it in the little closet yonder where she went to get her bonnet, but I have searched it without finding anything to tell me whither she went."

Ford went to the closet and opened the door. It was a narrow place, scarcely large enough to admit of the entrance of his body, and besides it was as dark as Egypt.

Tina followed him to the door and stood guard there while he explored the interior.

"You won't find the letter there," said the child. "She took it with her, I am sure she did, and when she comes back—"

"Is this it, Tina?" interrupted the detective, at that moment coming out of the closet and holding up before the little one's face the letter his hunting hands had found amid the gloom.

"That looks like the envelope!" was the reply. "But, sir, I hunted all through the closet and couldn't find anything."

Ford Fox turned to the light which shone from the table and pulled forth the contents of the envelope.

Tina, at his elbow, her face aglow with expectancy, watched him like a little mother hawk, and ere he read a single line the ferret looked down into her face, wondering what would become of the child if deprived of Mother Clutch's care.

It was not a lengthy letter which the detective had captured in the dark. It was a single sheet and one which carried but few words, for not many were needed to get the woman away from her den.

"Do you think you have found the right letter, sir?" asked the girl. "Are you sure that is the one which took Mother Clutch off?"

Ford was quite sure. He was as certain of it as though the writer of the letter had told him so. It could not be otherwise for it bore the post-mark of the city and the date was that of the day before.

"I have come back and want to see you at once. If you care to leave your old den and be somebody once more, as you were once, you will come to the address given below. Please destroy this and don't let any one see it in your hands. You know why."

"THERON."

The address given in the same handwriting at the bottom of the sheet was one which the detective was sure he could find. It was across the city, near the docks, and in a neighborhood not very "swell," but he believed that to it had gone the woman who had received the letter.

Tina was waiting to be told where Mother Clutch had gone and her countenance fell when the ferret did not enlighten her.

"You haven't told me what the letter says," meekly said the child. "Does it tell you where we can look for Mother Clutch? She never stayed away so long before and I am alarmed."

Well you may be, child.

The letter, if a decoy, was one calculated to deceive just such a woman as Mother Clutch. It had been written for a purpose, and the fact that the woman had not come back to her *protegee* since going off after the reception of that missive, was enough to fill the man-hunter with fears for her safety.

Ford Fox folded the letter and thrust it into his pocket.

"Are you going to look for Mother Clutch?" piped the little one.

"Perhaps. Well, Tina, what have you seen at the other window since they carried the man out?"

Tina turned with a start toward the window of Hiram Harkness's deserted den and then threw a quick glance at the ferret.

"I haven't watched it very much since," said she. "It has filled me with dread ever since that night. The thumbless hand has been in all my dreams and I sometimes feel it at my throat. It is as cold as ice when it comes, and the touch awakens me. I wish I had never seen it on the

wall over yonder, nor watched it draw the curtain."

"Then, you haven't watched the house much since?"

"No. I was almost afraid to look that way."

"But it has been dark over there, eh?"

"Yes, dark until now. Look yonder Mr. Fox! Don't you see that a light is in yon room?"

The hand of the detective turned down the light on Tina's table, and sprung to the window which looked into the room of the crime. The child, instead of following him, drew back and turned white.

There was a light in the room which he had searched, but it was a dim one. The curtain was drawn, as Tina had seen it pulled to by the thumbless hand, and over it and upon the ceiling was a shadow just perceptible, and one which moved across the white surface like a creeping ghost.

For half a minute, spellbound as it were by the startling sight, Ford Fox stood and gazed at the scene. He felt that the hand which ended Hiram Harkness's life had come back, and that he was looking at the shadow of the owner of the strange hand.

Presently the shadow stopped as if the man in the room had come to a standstill, and then the ferret turned toward Tina and saw her eyes, large and lustrous, almost starting from her head.

"'Tis he!" cried the little one. "'Tis the missing thumb! Now you know who came in and killed Mr. Mystery, the man the papers are calling Number 99."

There was no response. Ford Fox knew that he could not reach the sill of the opposite window without alarming the man in the room, therefore he sprung to the door and vanished, even while the child looked at him with amazement.

It was the chance of a lifetime for the cool and level-headed sharp.

Passing down to the street below, he found the door leading into the tenement standing ajar, and slipping into the hall, he was lost to sight in an instant.

Ford found himself in the place which, with Mother Clutch, he had entered the night of the finding of Number 99, and the same staircase rose before him. It led to the upper floors, and on one of these was the room of the crime.

The fearless ferret stole up the steps with caution and agility. He made but little noise, though the stairs creaked and at last reaching the floor where the room was, he stopped and looked toward the door.

There was a light under the portal, a faint light, but enough to tell him that the person whom he and Tina had seen moving through the curtain had not come out. Had he come back to the scene of the mysterious murder? What had brought him back to the room where the life of the hunted convict had gone out in a manner which still puzzled the police, for the wound in the neck was not sufficient to cause death, and all said that some terrible agency had helped the assassin.

For more than five minutes, hugging the dirty wall of the corridor, the detective watched that fatal door. The light did not shift, showing that the tenant of the room was busy at some work, and, eager to get a glimpse of him, the ferret stole forward at last and halted at the door itself.

There he stood like a statue and for some time listened with all ears for a sound which he did not hear.

The interior of the room was as silent as a tomb. If the person who had invaded it was still there he must have fallen asleep where the light was. It was a puzzle for the ferret of Gotham.

All at once he heard the slight moving of a chair. It was very slight, but did not escape the keen ear of the detective.

The person in the room had moved at last and might be expected to open the door.

In an instant he had drawn back and was on the watch. His figure threw no shadow on the wall, and all was still where he stood. For once the human bee-hive seemed asleep.

Slowly the door opened and the light which burned on the table for a second showed the detective the full figure which crossed the threshold.

As the door opened fully the man there turned back and put forth his hand. In another moment the light in the room went out and the hall was as dark as before. The jet burning at one end of it did not much dissipate the darkness, but it was enough to show the detective the figure that glided to the steps and then moved toward the bottom floor.

He went to the bannister and looked down. The man who had come out of the room was moving down the stairs with the cunning of a fox, and the ferret overhead was waiting until he was far enough down to let him follow with safety.

At last Ford Fox moved. Down the same steps he went until he reached the street. The man was just ahead of him and he started in pursuit.

Up one street and down another, under the

lights and through the shadows of New York, first toward the river and then back from the flowing tide!

It was a long chase but the man stopped at last.

He mounted the steps of a house and let himself inside. It was a house standing in a good neighborhood and he appeared to live there from the fact that he had let himself in without knocking.

The door closing behind the detective's quarry hid him for the night, and Ford Fox, nearing the place, saw the number above the door.

It was not the number given in the letter which had drawn Mother Clutch from home.

It was on a different street and, he believed, a different sort of house. But what puzzled the detective was the fact that the man whom he had followed was the counterpart of the one whom Winton White had seen in his strange dream. It was the man who had talked to the woman about his death, and, what is more, before his quarry reached home the ferret had recognized him as Major Rubio, a man of whom he had already heard.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE THUMBLESS HAND AGAIN.

TURNING from the house to which he had tracked Major Rubio, the detective of Gotham resolved to go back to the trail which he had thought to take up upon quitting Mother Clutch's house.

This was the trail which might lead to the discovery of the old bag herself and the finding of the place to which she must have been decoyed by the letter discovered in the closet.

He did not for a moment doubt that Mother Clutch had been decoyed from home by some one connected with the mysterious crime of the tenement, and therefore he was anxious to find out whose hand had done this latter work. Was it the hand of the missing thumb, or had some other taken a part in the tragedy, and was Mother Clutch to be put out of the way because she had seen the hand in red on the wall, or, perhaps, because the party knew that she had been the nurse of Hiram Harkness's child?

Ford Fox went back over a portion of the trail made by Major Rubio from the house of the crime; he crossed several streets over which the handsome man had led him, and at last stood in the vicinity of the number given in Mother Clutch's letter.

As has been said already, it was near the docks. Less than a square distant ran the river, and far out upon its surface were to be seen the lights of the city.

Ford Fox glided down the street almost to the river itself. He did not have to look at the letter to keep the wanted place in his mind, but knew whither he was going.

Suddenly he stopped and fell to watching a little house which was as dark as the domiciles of Erebus, and over which seemed to hang a pall of fear and mystery. It was a curious old house, of ancient date, and looked as if it was used for the haunt of criminals. Dark as it was, sounds issued from beyond its doors, and when the ferret advanced again he heard a song which came from the old place, with the drinking chorus of a lot of revelers.

There was no mistaking the number of this house. It was over the door in bold figures, seen by the light that filled the hallway, and the man who went to the door itself and stood there, heard the last verses of the song which came out and seemed to die among the waves of the river.

Was it true that Mother Clutch had been decoyed to that old house? Was she there still, or had the writer of the letter played out his hand in full, dooming the witness of the finding of Number 99 to a death somewhere else?

It soon became apparent to the detective that but one side of the house was the scene of the orgies. The other side was as quiet as the grave and as dark. The hall ran through the middle of the building, and all the revel was on the right-hand side.

This discovery made, the detective resolved to push open the door, an inch ajar, and when he had done so he found himself in the hall, with a door at his left hand—a door apparently locked and bolted, while from the rooms on his right came the clinking of glasses and the laughter of drunken men.

Ford Fox tried the door on the left, but it was as immovable as a portal of iron.

Falling back a moment, he looked at the door and then leaned toward the scene of revelry.

Fearful of sudden discovery, he went to the end of the hall and turned out the jet there, then he stood in one corner while the door leading to the wild scene opened, and a man came into the corridor.

He staggered as he walked.

"Whew! it's as dark as Erebus here!" the detective heard him exclaim. "The light was burning awhile ago—"

"Go on. You're not afraid, are you?"

"The man's a liar who says I am!" was the answer. "Go on? Of course I will."

He tottered down the hall, narrowly missing

the detective, and opened a door at the end of the place. Before it could be closed by the man, Ford Fox had followed.

They stood in the dark in a room, the dimensions of which the detective could not see. Ford fell back so as not to touch the fellow, and quietly waited for him to make another move.

"There's no one here," said the voice of the man. "I have to do something to win my bet. I will find the furniture and take a chair back to prove that I've been here."

Ford heard him groping in the dark, then he heard the movement of a chair as it was dragged forward and, shrinking toward the wall so as not to be touched by the fellow, he heard both man and chair quit the chamber leaving him in the dark.

In another moment the ferret had struck a match.

He let the little flame shoot up and show him the interior of the room. It was a small place, almost devoid of furniture; but he saw that some one had lately crossed the floor, for a trail was there where a garment had disturbed the dust.

The detective followed this trail, slight as it was, bending downward and moving his torch along the floor. There was no mistake about the trail he had struck. The floor being carpetless, a great deal of dust had accumulated, and across the boards had passed a garment which, in his eyes, was the hem of Mother Clutch's dress.

It went to a door and stopped there. As Ford Fox saw this, he smiled and tried to open this door, but could not. It was as immovable as the door in the hall.

But he had not come to that house to be baffled. If he was on Mother Clutch's trail, he was not the man to stop where he was then. He had entered the game to play the best hand he could, and with a registered oath that no thumbless hand should defeat him.

He opened the door with a key which he found in his pocket. But for the trail of the dress he might not have gone thus far, but it had goaded him on.

Beyond the door was a curious room, if room it can be called. It was more like a half closet for it was small and narrow. On one side of this place was a row of nails for hanging up clothes; but for all this it seemed to have been used for other purposes. Ford Fox's keen eyes soon detected this.

In the floor at his feet rested an iron ring which had no dust around it then.

He stooped and catching this ring, lifted a door which showed him a yawning abyss down which the best eyes of human kind could not see ten inches.

But the detective had recourse to his match again and it revealed the narrow steps which seemed to lead into the center of the earth.

Ford looked at the first step and saw there the same unmistakable trail of the garment. He had followed it from the room behind him and here it was, going down those unknown steps into the darkness of the subterranean.

Many a man at this juncture would have fallen back from the sight and sought help, but not so the youngest ferret in New York.

He merely smiled when he looked down into the pit and saw that beyond the first step all was as black as night, and that the trail of the garment went down, down—he knew not whither.

The match went out, but the detective descended into the darkness with his hand on the revolver which for the first time he had drawn.

The door he courageously shut behind, and then going forward step by step he at last reached ground which was damp and slightly yielding to his feet.

This part of the strange place gained, the detective stood for a few moments and collected his ideas. What was before him was the unknown and the unseen. He wondered if the trail of the garment went on and on through the gloom. He wondered if Mother Clutch had preceded him and if she was waiting somewhere to be rescued, or was she lying like Number 99 had lain with the print of the thumbless hand on the wall above her face?

Ford Fox groped his way in the dark for a spell and at last, finding himself against a wall, he struck a light and waited for the flame to show him where he was.

The first glance he gave was toward the ground. He saw there the dark earth of the underground hole and then, looking with more scrutiny, he discovered the mark of a shoe.

"A woman has been here!" cried the ferret. "This is the right trail. Dust on the floor, the print of a woman's shoe here; that is right. I am still on the trail."

The track of the shoe led the shadower across the chamber and he, to his surprise, discovered there a little door curiously set in the wall among the stones.

The foot-tracks ended there; they came to an end at the closed threshold of the hidden room or corridor beyond, and the detective, looking up, saw his match go out as he put forth his hand and seized the iron latch of the portal.

It pulled open with a squeak and the moment it had been thrown wide a draft of cold air

rushed into the ferret's face. He recoiled for an instant and then went forward.

"The river is out yonder," said he. "I smell the piers and hear the water."

He was standing in the dark now; ahead were the lights of the boats on the river, but they did not illumine the place where he had halted.

To have reached the river through that strange route was not very surprising now. For some time the detective had expected to come out upon just such a scene, and he had not been disappointed. The trail of the garment was to end at the river.

As yet he had no proof that he had trailed Clutch. There was nothing to tell him that he had found the whereabouts at any time of the decoyed woman—nothing but the house whose number was in the letter which the old woman had obeyed.

Ford Fox went to the end of the corridor. He stood against the wet wall with the waves breaking at his feet as they rushed shoreward, and wondered if Mother Clutch had come to that place before him.

He needed no light now. The match was of no avail, for he could look out upon the river and see the flitting boats, and now and then hear the laugh and oath of the river rat.

He had reached the end of the night trail. The water gave forth no sign that the garment had passed beyond the threshold of that underground opening to the heart of the stream. The detective had to go back.

Puzzled still, but believing that the feet whose tracks he had seen on the ground had passed to the very end of the river vent, the man of trails turned back again. He moved up the narrow way toward the door which had let him into the place and thence to the steps down which he had moved a few moments before.

Once more he stood in the chamber where the garment had disturbed the dust; once more he looked down at the marks and smiled. Mother Clutch's trail, was it? Time would tell.

Ford Fox turned back to the hall which led past the room where the revelers were still worshipping at the shrine of Bacchus. He heard their wild orgies, heard the clashing of glasses as they were dashed to the floor, and all at once, as if the whole wild game had ended, the drunkards rushed pell-mell into the hall, throwing the detective back against the wall.

Ford Fox stood there while he waited for the revelers to pass out, and when the last ones had vanished, he breathed free once more and laughed at his narrow escape.

But at that moment the door on the left opened—the one which he had tried and found as immovable as iron.

There stepped from this room and into the hall revealed by the revelers' light, a man whom the ferret eyed from the first like a hawk.

"The fools have gone at last, I hope!" he said, in a voice which was clearly heard by the detective. "I wonder if they left anything behind?"

He crossed the hall with an agile bound, and Ford Fox heard him rustling the bottles and glasses in his efforts to find something drinkable.

"Ah, here it is—a whole bottle overlooked!" cried the man, and the ferret, slipping down the wall at the risk of being recognized, looked in upon the fellow among the ruins of the night's revel.

Then he saw that he was a tall, wiry-looking man, with a smooth face and bright eyes, rather well-dressed, and past thirty.

But he saw more than this; yes, the searching eyes of the man-hunter saw that the hand which clutched the bottle that lost its neck at the edge of the table had no thumb!

CHAPTER IX.

THE PLAY OF THE HINDOO.

THE reader will readily recall the visit of Joral Jet, the serpent-seller, to the house occupied by Major Rubio and Edna; he will recollect the passionate glances which the old Indian threw toward the beautiful girl, and how he asked the major if he would not give the fair young creature to him for his wife.

The very audacity of a demon was in this request, and the effect of it upon Major Rubio was to fire his heart and lead to his exclamation after the serpent-seller's departure, that he would sooner kill Edna than see her his wife.

But Joral Jet was not to be baffled; he had seen something prettier than his snake, and from the moment of coming in contact with Edna, he seemed to lose interest in the cages and their deadly occupants.

While Ford Fox, the ferret, was watching in the corridor of the old house near the docks while the man with the thumbless hand drank the remains of the feast, Joral Jet was setting a snare for the object of his love.

Among his serpents which hissed and writhed in their cages, he made up a band calculated to strike terror to the heart of the man who had defied him.

"He flashed like a spark when I talked about the girl's beauty," laughed Joral, playing with his long, dusky fingers so like those of the stranglers of his native land. "He drew back and for a moment looked as if he would leap at my throat and tear it open. I thought he would start and look daggers at me, but I know how

to bring him round. This haughty man who calls himself Major Rubio has another name which he would not have known by his people for all the money he has and for a dozen pretty creatures like Edna, as he calls her. Why shouldn't I think of a wife? I have saved money enough to let her live like a queen in a better place than this, and I wouldn't live here with her. No, I could kill or sell my little snakes and go out of the business. They don't look for me any longer, the dark men of my native land don't, and the old snake-charmer of Bengal is lost to them forever. Why shouldn't I have a pretty wife like Edna?" and he laughed till the serpents took up the noise and seemed to laugh too as they came to the bars of the cages and poked their tongues through.

Joral Jet, the husband of Edna? Such a wretch the keeper of her hand and fortunes? The thought is horror.

For some time the old fellow continued to talk in the strain he had inaugurated and at last, springing to his feet with his little eyes snapping like coals, he struck the bench near by with his withered fist and declared, by the gods of India, that he would not step until he had shown Major Rubio that he was not to be baffled.

Business had been dull for two days.

He had sold but one serpent and that one an old boa which he was glad to get rid of. No one had come for "the little killers" and the one which had come home minus its tail had died despite the care he had taken of it.

Every now and then he thought of the thumbless hand, and whenever the maimed member entered his mind he smiled and twined his skeleton fingers one about the other as though the memory of that person seemed to give him strange delight and excite his nerves.

He had seen nothing of this man since the purchase of the serpent. Did he know that Hiram Harkness, the convict, had been murdered in the den in which he had hid from the police? Had the news of that new puzzle in crime reached the old man among his snakes? If it had, he gave out no sign and waited for customers with the patience that had characterized the long years of his life.

Major Rubio had confessed to Edna that he had met Joral Jet abroad; he had said to the girl so near him that the old rascal should not enter the house again, and Edna, believing this, had retired with a smile to try to forget the eyes which had fascinated her from the foot of the stairs.

On the night now in question Joral Jet did not stir from his trance-like state until the clock struck eleven.

The last snake had gone to sleep and the little cages were as silent as that many tombs.

Throwing a tattered coat over his shoulders, the old man crept from the place.

In another house a few steps from the snake den he put on other garments which completely changed his appearance. Now he looked like a gentleman despite the dark skin and the wonderful eyes. The garments fitted his figure to a nicety, and when he viewed himself in a mirror, he showed his approbation in a smile, and leaving the old clothes behind, left the spot and sought the street.

Just half an hour later the young man known as Winton White heard footsteps in the hall which ended at his door, and before he could cross the room and keep the maker of those steps out, the door opened and in came the sleek Satan in black—Joral Jet, the serpent-seller.

Winton White fell back with a cry not to be suppressed when he saw the old man advance with a tread which reminded him of the tread of a leopard. He reclined on a couch while he watched Joral Jet, and when the serpent-seller stopped and eyed him a strange change seemed to come over the dreamer's face.

"So you are here yet? I thought I wouldn't find you elsewhere," grinned Joral. "You aren't going to be here long?"

The old scamp seemed to take great delight in telling the dreamer this. The thin face and the almost transparent hands of the young man were proof enough of these words, and they sunk at once into Winton White's heart.

"I am going to prove you a liar," he said under his breath as he watched the Indian. "I have given up before, but from this moment I take new courage and all your infamous prophecies shall be proven false. Die! Not while you live to sell snakes and plunder people. I won't go yet, no matter how my hands look and how often I see those wild visions, which come from the Unknown and pass back into the Unseen."

"Do you dream yet?" queried Joral, bending toward the dreamer.

"Why not?" smiled Winton.

"What did you dream last?"

"I saw you, Joral."

The serpent-seller started.

"You saw me, sahib?" he cried.

"I saw you, I say."

"In the dream?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, what was I doing?"

"You were dead!"

The start this time was so sudden that the old man nearly fell from the chair. Whether he

had any faith in Winton White's dreams or not it was plain that the young man's words had frightened him.

"Go on and tell me," he said, putting out his hand as if to touch Winton, but immediately withdrawing it. "Let me hear all about that dream. I was dead, was I?"

"As dead as your snakes will be some day. I saw you lying on the floor of your den and the serpents were holding carnival over the bloated corpse of their master."

"No, no, not that way!"

Winton White seemed to see that he was striking terror to the heart of this strange man and, eager to drive another arrow home, he went on:

"It was midnight as I could see by the little clock that stands behind your chair, and the biggest boa had your body in his folds and the little green serpents were biting with all their might. Presently I heard the crashing of bones—heard it, you know, Joral—and when the big boa crawled away there was nothing but a crushed body where he had tried his powers."

There was no movement by the man who with distorted countenance and fear-stricken eyes had listened to this prophecy of his own end.

Joral Jet sat as rigid as a corpse in the chair alongside the bed, and the young man, with all the delight of a fiend, was enjoying his trepidation.

"It is nonsense!" suddenly cried the serpent-seller. "You are trying to frighten me. The snakes can't get out of their cages and I can't enter them, so I have the best of the slimy fellows."

"I can't help that. I only tell you what I saw in my dream while I lay here with my eyes open. You don't believe it, eh? Well, that's all right, Joral. I hope it won't be so, but you know what strange things I see while I am alone here. Why, after dreaming that I saw you dead among your snakes there came into the room where you lay a hand that walked."

"What, boy, a walking hand, you say?"

"Yes. It was that and nothing else. But it was the queerest hand you ever saw, for it had no thumb."

"No hand I ever saw is like that," and the body of Joral Jet recoiled. "No thumb, you say?"

"Yes."

"Well, what did that hand do?"

"It tore the little snakes from your person and lifted the body from the floor."

"It stole me, eh?"

"Literally stole you!" echoed Winton White. "I saw it carry you from the room. It passed over my carpet, as it were, and then you vanished, Joral."

"It is a lie! You have been dreaming of evil all the time," and the hand of the old man, clinched like an iron fist, struck the bed until it shook.

Winton White never removed his eyes from the serpent-seller. He felt that the assertion that he had never seen the thumbless hand was untrue.

It had startled the old scoundrel and had had the effect which the dreamer wanted to secure.

"I've seen her," suddenly cried Joral. "I've been to the house where lives the prettiest creature in this city. She is like the rising sun and her face outshines the stars in Heaven."

"Ho, what means this?" cried White. "When did you let a face fascinate you thus?"

"Not long ago. I knew he had a child, but I never saw her until lately. She is the fairest creature in all this world, and the maidens of India are as beautiful as the sheen of the Ganges. I am going to make her my wife. I shall go to her father, as he calls himself, and say: 'Give her to Joral,' and he will not hesitate."

Winton White seemed to recoil to the wall.

"Do you think that a parent will give his child to you?" he exclaimed. "Why, man, you are not of the white race. You are a member of that mystic people whose religion is against the religion of the whites. No father will willingly give his child to you."

"You don't know," laughed the old man, and to the dreamer that laugh sounded like the hiss of one of his serpents. "You don't know how I hold him in my hand like a vise holds the iron. I can make him walk down the darkest way ever taken by one of your accursed people, and when I go to him and ask for the hand of this fair girl, he will not withhold the girl."

"You are mad. What do you want with a white wife—one who can never love a creature like you?"

The blood of the mystic dreamer was getting hot.

"I will take her to a home where she can live like a queen. I can build for her in this city a palace as fair as those of my own country—"

"And surround her with the snakes that hiss and bite each other in your den?"

"No, no! For her I will kill my pets!"

"No matter what you promise or perform. There is no man who will give you his child."

"He will! He shall!" cried Joral Jet, and his face came forward until the eyes seemed to blaze on the white cheeks of the occupant of the couch.

"What is this fool's name?" asked Winton.

"Where does this infamous father live?"

"He is rich and a man among men," answered Joral. "He moves in good society, but society knows nothing about his past. I know. I have seen him among the temples of India, and long before I came to this land I met him and taught him the religion of India among the tamarinds of Benares. Where does he live? Ah, if you took a walk some day and crossed the city to a house where three trees shade the walk—where one of them is bent and broken as if some storm swept long ago through its body—you would see where lives the man whom you call 'the fool.'"

A cry came from the young man's throat and seemed to hurl him at Joral Jet like a shaft let loose from a catapult.

"What's that? You don't mean to say that the object of your madness lives in a house shaded as you have told me?"

"Why not? What makes your eyes pop from your head? You ought to go to dreaming again."

"What is her name?" cried Winton White without heeding the Indian's last sentences.

"Her father calls her Edna."

The dreamer seemed to clutch at the dark throat of the serpent-seller ere he sunk back upon the couch with a groan.

"It is a lie—a mad lie!" he exclaimed. "Major Rubio will not give Edna to you. Why, man, I have loved the girl myself. I have shut myself up here, hoping to conquer this disease and at last go forth to claim her. You her husband? This shall never be. I will live to baffle you. I will beat back this mysterious malady which brings with it these prophetic visions. I will live to see that your game fails and that you never wreck the life of Edna!"

Joral Jet laughed and the hand which he put out in derision was seized and dashed aside with an oath that whitened his evil face.

The next moment Winton White went at him like a leopard.

CHAPTER X.

THE FATE OF A SERPENT.

THE man with the serpents must have thought in the excitement of the moment that he had roused a young lion, for when he was pushed from the chair and found under his chin the skeleton-like fingers of Winton White, he gasped and tried to writhe from the deadly grasp.

"You become her husband?" cried the dreamer. "Why, I will kill you first and then march to the gallows with a song of triumph. You shan't play out the hand which you have uncovered. I will come between. I will recover and become strong enough to baffle a tiger like you. Go back to your snakes. Go back to them now and die as you should by their poison, for you can never become the husband of Edna."

An unnatural strength was at the young man's muscles, and as with his teeth firm set, he pushed old Joral toward the door, he seemed on the eve of dashing the Indian's head against the wall, an accident which might have ended the serpent-seller's career.

"Darken my door again and I will not be responsible for the result!" continued Winton White. "Come to me with the infamous plans you have laid for Edna's destruction, and your end shall be as certain as that of your victims. I will kill and then proclaim the deed in public."

The door was opened and the following moment Joral Jet was reflecting beyond the door and still feeling the grip of the flexible hand at his throat.

For a moment he stood there with his eyes on fire and his black hands shut like bunches of bones, then he moved toward the door as though about to throw himself against it; but all at once he seemed to take calmer counsel and finally turned away.

But the look which he gave ere he turned from White's abode was dark enough and boded the young man no good.

Not a word escaped the old Indian's lips. If he could have looked back into the room perhaps he would have retraced his steps, for on the couch exhausted, and almost as weak as a child, lay the young dreamer, his hands clinched among the bed-clothes and his face the hue of bleached ashes.

He had overtaxed his strength; the excitement had been too much for him, and if the old snake-seller had gone back he would have obtained an easy victory.

Two hours passed before Winton White came out of that almost deadly trance.

Then he moved by degrees to the edge of the bed and next across the room. A bottle which he took from a shelf was drained and he threw himself into a chair while the hue of life gradually came back and his eyes resumed their old light. It was a terrible struggle between will power and the mysterious disease; it was love on one side battling against the published decrees of fate, and when Winton White rose and stood erect, his face had resumed its old hues; but he still breathed hard.

"The devil in dark has uncovered himself," said Winton, aloud. "He gave away his plans, not knowing the love that brought me here to die where Edna could not hear of my fate. Now I will live. Now I will beat off the mon-

ster and baffle this man. What is the secret he holds over Major Rubio? What were they in India, and is the major a fool to accede to the demands of this wretch? It shall not be! I have warned the detective, telling him about the man and woman who came to me in the vision. I did not tell him that the man was the counterpart of this very Major Rubio; I left him to find that out for himself, if he will. I did not reveal my love for Edna to the man-hunter. No, I could not do that. It was like telling him the best secret of my life; but I let it out to this old serpent king. I could not keep it back when I heard him say that he would make the girl his wife and—"

He stopped, for footsteps seemed to approach his door.

Leaning toward the portal, he listened, but the sounds were not repeated and he smiled to himself as though he had been deceived.

"I will not let the old rascal succeed. I will quit this house and come between Edna and her fate. I wonder when Ford Fox will come back, if ever. But no; I will not tell him. I will fight the battle without his assistance. I will save Edna without the detective's help."

When the young man looked at the clock ticking on the shelf, he realized that more than two hours had passed since Joral Jet's departure.

"I will take a draught of the elixir and try it," he exclaimed, turning to his medicine cupboard, and taking a deep drink from a bottle which he found on the lower shelf.

The effects of the liquor were instantaneous, for he seemed to get new strength, and the next minute he stood near the door, looking at the couch with the delight of a cured man. But he knew that the power of that strange medicine was but temporary; he had tried it before and had seen its effects pass off to set him back another notch toward the grave.

While he stood at the door something seemed to glide across the carpet at his feet.

Whatever it was, it glittered in the light and vanished as if possessed of life. Then he thought of the footsteps he thought he had heard in the hall and turned from the door to pick up the light.

"It looked to me like a snake," said Winton White, as he began to look for the object which had escaped. "It came from under my feet and almost touched them. Where is it?"

Light in hand, he went toward the corner where the gilded thing had disappeared and hunted for it with the zeal of an endangered man.

"It wasn't the elixir for it never affects me that way," he said, in response to his thoughts. "I saw something run across the carpet; I know I did. Hal! what was that?"

Again the bright object ran across the carpet and vanished underneath the couch.

Winton White tried to set his foot upon it, but failed, for it was as agile as an eel and when it vanished he resolved to hunt it down.

He replaced the lamp on the table and pulled the cot from the wall. This done, he looked behind it and saw coiled in one corner a snake which had two eyes that looked like emeralds.

The hue of the serpent was of the most dazzling description; its scales glistened in the light and almost blinded the young dreamer.

"Hal! this is your stroke, Joral Jet!" he exclaimed. "I heard you at the door and you let loose the dreadful death you deal in. I see what I have to fear now. I see that I have to fight you and your infernal serpents."

The serpent uncoiled and struck out its fangs at Winton White; but he was too quick for it and the poison missed its mark.

Then the snake, rendered furious by its failure, darted from the corner and came toward the youth who, to escape its fangs, sprung upon the bed, and with the stick he had taken up dealt it a blow which doubled it in the middle of the room.

It was a blow so truly dealt that a second one was not needed, and when Winton got down from the couch and held the lamp over the snake, he saw the last convulsive movement of the forked tongue and watched the eyes as they faded in death.

Fearless, now, he picked the snake up and laid it across his little table.

It was just thirteen inches in length and at no place thicker than his little finger. But for all that it was of a deadly breed, and one bite of its fangs would have sent him beyond the help of the hand of science.

It looked beautiful as it lay harmless on his board, with its varied hues gleaming in the light and its little eyes now changing from red to green and back again.

But it was harmless now. The play of the old serpent-seller had failed and the destroyer was dead in the home of the intended victim.

After awhile Winton took the snake up and found a box into which he coiled the folds and then placed it under lock and key.

"I will go now. I guess there will be no more snakes here to-night. This one has failed and old Joral will dream that this little pet has brushed a rival from his path. Let him dream! I will break in upon his vision by and by and the dark hand of this devil from the

Ganges shall discover that I am further from the grave than he hopes."

The young man unlocked his door and passed out. The night air which he had not felt for some time made him shiver, though it was not cold, and after recovering he started off to vanish round the first corner, his first trip from home for many a long day.

Winton White made his way to a part of the city which he had not visited for some time.

He turned up in the near vicinity of Major Rubio's house and fell to watching the place whose roof sheltered Edna.

All at once there came out from the shadow of the trees a figure which he recognized at once.

It was the angular and agile form of the old rascal from the mystic land.

Joral Jet had come to that same part of the city and Winton, with the old rage coming back, watched him as he crept toward the house and at last rested for a moment on the steps.

Was he going to enter to claim the prize he was trying to win? Had he selected that hour for the victory which he had sworn to achieve despite the refusal of Major Rubio at their last meeting?

Winton White drew nearer. He saw at last the glitter of the eyes that shone in the head of the Indian fiend. He seemed to read the very thoughts of the villain as he stood in the shadows and gloated over the prey almost in his hands.

Edna must be asleep in the house dreamless of the dark fate near at hand, and this thought setting fire to Winton's blood, he started forward and landed with a spring at the old Indian's side.

Joral Jet heard the hot exclamation of rage and turned with a cry.

"You here, you infamous wretch," cried Winton, seizing the old man and throwing him against the nearest tree. "I will choke you to death and leave your dead body where it falls."

The strength of the speaker was no longer that of one on the verge of the unseen world. His hands sunk into Joral's throat and he looked at him with eyes that seemed to burn on his dark and wrinkled cheeks.

In vain did the serpent-seller try to twist from the vise-like grip of the young dreamer. Winton held him fast and laughed at his fear.

"Your snake failed to kill. You can find it dead by going back to my house!" he cried. "You turned it loose in my room, hoping that it would find me sleeping and do its deadly work; but it ran across my floor while I was awake and I killed it with a blow. The snake is dead, I say. Don't you hear me?"

The body before the young dreamer was rigid like the body of one dead.

"Is this mummery or reality?" Winton asked himself. "Is this one of the tricks of mysticism, or have I really killed the old rascal with my too eager hands?"

He drew back and loosened his grip. He looked for a moment at the figure that remained upright against the tree and then started toward it again.

Joral Jet remained standing till the hands of Winton White touched him; then the body fell to one side and, eluding the youth's clutch, slid to the ground.

Winton White looked at it with a smile, for if he had been sure he had killed the villain he would not have felt a twinge of fear.

It would have meant the saving of Edna.

But when he stooped over the body and felt the pulse of which there was not the slightest tremor, and when he looked into the dark face and the serpent-like eyes, he believed that he had committed murder and that the villain of villains—the old serpent-seller of Gotham—was dead.

The dreamer sprang up and started toward the house, but near the steps he stopped and turned.

"No! I won't tell Major Rubio. He has no love for me, and though I have done him a favor, I will not be first to break the news. They will find him there; the police will find the old tiger of Benares, and I can go back with the secret. Some time, perhaps, Edna will know the truth, and then—Ah! if that time ever comes, she shall know it all."

Winton White ran down the street, but at the corner he stopped and looked back.

The street was quiet; the three trees nodded their heads toward the house and not a sign of life greeted him.

No one had seen the attack and the serpents had lost their master, while he had saved the life of the woman he loved.

CHAPTER XI.

TINA'S MISSION.

FORD FOX, the detective, looking into the room from the hall where he had halted to watch the man with the thumbless hand, saw him drink greedily of the wine left by the boisterous revelers, and at last throw the empty bottle into the corner to repose with the rest.

He had a good opportunity to study the face he had never seen before, and note that the hand was really thumbless. He had tracked some serpent across the rooms which he had lately left, and thence, as he was sure, to the

river through the subterranean passage which led him to the waters.

Who was this man and why had he stolen in upon Number 99 the night of the crime? Had he hunted down the old-time convict and taken his life while he lived in seclusion trying to die alone without the police discovering that he was the escaped prison eagle?

The thumbless hand remained in the room until the last drop of wine had been consumed, and then the detective heard him laugh over his feast.

"He is coming out," thought Ford Fox. "This man has feasted and is ready to make a play of some kind."

The detective drew back and waited for the Unknown.

He heard the man come toward the door and while he hugged the wall he came out and re-entered the room from which he had been seen to emerge.

The ferret of New York saw that he was as strong as a lion and that his shoulders were broad and indicative of great strength.

When the door had closed on the man with the missing thumb, Ford Fox watched it for a little while and then glided down the hall.

No doubt he had run down the person who might have left the imprint of his hand on the wall of the convict's room; he may have seen the very hand that had committed the deed, but there was still that doubt which he could not chase away.

Ford Fox opened the door and passed out.

He stood for half a minute on the sidewalk and then started off.

If he could have seen the man whom he had discovered as he re-entered the apartment alongside the hall, he might have started and watched him with more care.

But he thought that, as he had discovered the thumbless hand, the trail would not be lost by a little diversion, and he was far from the house near the river in a short time.

He went back to Winton White's house.

If the young man had dreamed that he was in danger and that from a hand which was not mutilated, he believed that he might go further and through one of his mystic visions see more than that.

The night was nearly over now and the earliest pedestrians were on the street flitting like specters through the early mists.

Having at all times the *entree* to that house, Ford Fox did not stop to knock, but opened the door by means of a key which he carried and stood in the living room of the dreamer.

The light burning faintly on the table showed him a recumbent figure on the couch, and while he looked he saw that the young man had retired dressed, as if he had come from the street or had fallen in one of his swoons before he could remove his clothes.

Winton White lay white and motionless on the couch with his thin face turned to the light, affording the ferret a good study of it.

The detective had entered so cautiously that the sleeper had not been disturbed, and for nearly ten minutes he watched the young man and seemed to wonder if the dread disease had made any new inroads toward the seat of life.

At last Winton opened his eyes and caught sight of the figure in his arm-chair.

In another moment he was sitting up with his gaze fastened upon Ford Fox and a smile played with his whitened lips.

"I am glad you have come," said White. "I would rather see you just now than any living person. I have had several startling adventures and the secret shall be yours."

"The secret?" thought the ferret. "What does the dreamer mean?"

Young White went to the drawer in which he had locked the dead serpent and carried it in its box to the detective.

"Where did you come across the reptile?" asked Ford.

"It came to me. I killed it in your corner."

"Under your bed, eh?"

"Yes."

"Oh, it came to you for a purpose. This is not one of our native snakes."

"It is a deadly serpent," smiled the dreamer, "and it came to my house to sting me. That is the way the old sinner took to 'get even,' as he calls it."

"The old sinner?" and the detective looked up into the young man's face.

"Joral, the old Indian, who deals in death. You have heard of him—the old Hindoo who sells snakes for any purpose to which the buyers want to put them. He asks no questions."

"Then you know him?"

"I know him," said the young man. "I have cause for hating the old wretch and if I didn't fail last night, or rather this morning, he won't sell any more snakes for deadly purposes."

Ford now took from his pocket a little package which he opened and dropped into his hand, something very like the tip of a serpent's tail.

Winton White gave vent to a low cry of astonishment when he saw the detective place the two tails side by side.

"They fit, don't they?" cried he. "I see that you have heard of old Joral and his snakes."

"I have never been to his den, but I have

heard of the Hindoo. These two tips are similar."

"They are exactly similar. I see that the tail you have once belonged to a snake like the one on the table. Both must have come from Joral Jet's den."

Ford Fox did not turn from the two tails until he had satisfied himself that both were of the same pattern and when he looked up to the dreamer's face he said:

"This little bit of tail was ground off by a heel."

"By a heel, eh?" cried Winton White.

"By a heel! It was found on the floor where the heel ground it off."

"I would have served my visitor the same way if I could last night. I tried to do so, but he slipped away so suddenly that I did not get the chance. The two snakes may have been mates."

The detective smiled.

"You are going to see, aren't you, Ford?"

"I am going to see," was the reply.

"You may not find the Indian at home."

"Why not?"

"I will tell you. You shall have the whole story," and the young dreamer took a long breath like a man who has a long task before him.

He had resolved to share the secret of the past night with the man of many trails. He would tell Ford Fox the whole of his adventure and get his advice. That he had killed the serpent-seller beneath the trees in front of Edna's home he had no doubt, and he wondered if the police had found the dark-skinned body where he had left it on the ground.

Ford Fox listened with much interest to the narrative of the dreamer's adventures of the night before. He did not let a word escape him, and when Winton finished he sat some time in moody silence.

"You may not have killed this man," said the ferret. "You know he is a mystic."

"I know that he has at his command all the strange arts of his stranger land. He may have shammed, but my hands knew not what they did. They seemed to close on him with a power I did not believe I possessed, and when he fell to the ground he lay like one dead in the lamp-light."

"If dead, the girl you love is safe from the hand of Joral Jet; if he lives, there is danger."

"I know that. I know that if he still lives and controls his snakes, the woman whom I love is in the shadow of death."

"You have not dreamed again?" asked the detective with much curiosity.

"No. I have seen no more visions. Something tells me that this singular malady has taken another turn. I feel new blood in my veins; I am going to live! I will not die while the girl Edna is in the shadow."

"Heaven grant that it may be so!" cried Ford Fox. "I am with you in this game against that wretch. His trail is approaching mine. He and his serpents are mixed up in this maze of crime."

Winton White looked at the serpent on the table.

"You mean that the tail which you found in the room where Number 99 was killed and where the print of the thumbless hand was left on the wall, came from the den of this serpent-seller."

"I believe it, but we will find the trail of the snake. We will trace it back to its starting point. My life is devoted to this work, and if it saves Edna from the hand of the destroyer our work will have been well done."

Half an hour later the detective stood once more on the street.

Morning had come; the first long streaks of daylight had stolen up the bay and were gilding the tall spires of the city.

Ford Fox, passing through the early fog which had settled over the city, looked up at a lofty window and smiled. He knew that he had left little Tina there and imagined that the child still slept the deep sleep of childhood.

Had Mother Clutch come back, or was the little one still alone in the chamber dreaming perhaps of the woman who had left her so strangely?

Ford turned toward the house and climbed the stairs.

He reached the door leading to Mother Clutch's room and stopped there.

No sound came from the apartment, and for a little while he remained at the portal without trying to open it. At length, however, he turned the knob, hardly expecting to see the door yield, when, to his astonishment, it opened and he looked into the room.

The place was flooded with light and the couch in one corner which the two were wont to share with one another was empty. Ford Fox looked twice before he was willing to admit that this was the case.

Tina was not there!

This discovery took the detective into the room and he stopped near the bed.

The covers had been turned down and nothing indicated that Tina had retired at all.

What had become of the waif?

From their first meeting the detective had taken an interest in little Tina. There was something attractive about her childish face, some-

thing so beautiful, that he had been drawn to her in an irresistible manner, and he had thought that the day might come when she could leave Mother Clutch's den and grow up elsewhere.

Missing now!

Ford Fox was perplexed while he looked about the room for a possible clue to the child's whereabouts.

Suddenly his eyes fell upon a crumpled bit of paper protruding from beneath the white pillow of the couch. It was looking out like the head of one of old Jorral's serpents, and the next moment it was in the detective's hand.

"It is from Tina!" cried he as he opened the paper and saw the poorly formed letters which had been traced by a childish hand.

"I am going out to find Mother Clutch. I am afraid of the thumbless hand for I saw it again last night after the detective went away."

"She saw the hand last night?" cried Ford Fox. "When and where? I left her late and she said nothing about it, then. Did it come back to the room where it was seen the night Number 99 was murdered? Did Tina see it there?"

With the note in his possession and his questions unanswered, he left the house and went down the creaking stairs.

Tina had gone out to look for Mother Clutch and he had tracked a garment to the river's edge!

What was the detective thinking about with his closed lips and determined visage?

"I will find them both!" he muttered.

CHAPTER XII.

ANOTHER DECOY.

HAD Tina seen the thumbless hand after the detective's departure from her home? Let us go back and see.

Ford Fox, eager to trace the woman who had been decoyed from home by the letter, signed "Theron," had barely quitted the tenement when a man glided into the lower hall and ascended the stairs.

There was nothing about his movements to indicate that he was an intruder for he was an ordinary looking person, and did not look at all like the man dreaded by the little one.

At the door leading to Tina's room he stopped and listened with his form half concealed by the shadows that prevailed.

Tina was at the table sewing, the only accomplishment she had been taught by Mother Clutch, and while her hands worked she looked up now and then, strangely glancing at the window as if she would look across the space between the two houses and see on the wall of the other one the hand seen there the night of the mysterious crime.

Suddenly the door opened. Tina heard it not and the next moment something fell at her feet. The child started and saw lying on the floor a bit of paper which she picked up. In a second she held in her hand a note which she tried to read as she bent forward for that purpose.

"It is from Mother Clutch!" cried the little one. "She is sick and wants me to come to her."

Just outside the door stood the man who had thrown that letter at Tina's feet. His face was white and calm and his hands were resting on his hips, as if he was biding his time which he knew would come.

"Where is the person who sent this?" cried Tina. "Where is the man who brought this letter from Mother Clutch?"

She ran to the door, but the man there had dodged back and was not to be seen.

Tina looked awhile and then, not satisfied, ran to the steps and looked down. She saw nothing, but as she turned back she caught the shadow of a hand on the wall—a shadow which the jet, burning midway in the corridor, threw there.

In an instant the child stopped and her heart stood still in her bosom. The hand was so real that she almost believed that she had seen it in the flesh, but another look told her that it was but a shadow.

But what startled her still more was the absence of a thumb! The hand had thrown its shadow on the wall in all its distinctness and the thumb was gone!

In a flash she recalled the hand on the wall of Number 99's room. That hand was red, but this one was darker and, in her mind, just as terrible. It moved not. Strange as it seemed, the owner of that hand was not visible at first, but the searching eyes of little Tina saw him at last, and with a sudden cry she drew back and ran to her room, the door of which she closed with a bang.

Breathing hard the child stood for a minute in the middle of the room and looked with blanched face toward the door. Would the dread hand enter? Would it attempt to follow her and there in the silence of her chamber add another crime to the one perpetrated in the chamber across the way? She thought of this and many other things. She recalled the last words of the detective who had told her that he would look for Mother Clutch, but here was a letter from her saying that she was sick and wanted her to come to her.

Why didn't she think that the thumbless hand might have brought that missive to her—that it

might have been a forgery or a decoy; but such thoughts did not enter her head.

Tina heard the clock strike and the door had not opened. She felt that the hand was still in the hall-way, but she dared not venture out to investigate. It might be there waiting for her, and there was no telling how soon it might open her door and spring forward like a tiger to take her life.

Half an hour passed in this manner. Tina waiting for the slayer, gradually found courage, and at last placed a chair at the door and attempted to look over the transom.

She was just tall enough for this and her heart beat with joy when she saw that the hand was no longer where she had seen it last.

The thumbless hand was gone!

For some time, however, the child did not open the door nor look beyond it into the hall. She realized that the man with the missing thumb was dangerous and, if dangerous, he was cunning.

At last she opened the door and ventured out. The place was untenanted. Not a sign of the hand which had thrown its shadow on the wall, and no sounds of the footsteps of its dread owner.

When Tina went back to her little room after discovering that the coast was clear, she re-read the letter which had been thrown to her again, and resolved that she would obey it. Perhaps the man with the missing thumb knew nothing of the letter; he may have been in the house on another mission and, then, why should he look after her? She could not think how he could know that she had seen the hand on the wall of Mr. Mystery's room and told the detective.

Tina wrote the little note which Ford Fox discovered underneath the pillow, and donning a hood went down upon the street. She looked for Mother Clutch at that hour? What would be her guide and whither would she go to find the old hag who had been her companion so long?

The lights almost blinded the child. They flared in the wind which was blowing hard and made her cheeks cold.

Tina had mastered the address given in the note which had been dropped in her room. She had mastered it for the purpose of finding Mother Clutch, and when she started off it was in a hap-hazard manner and with a resolve to ask some one for the direction of the street given in the letter.

This first person was a policeman who stood at the first corner she reached and the child did not hesitate to accost him.

The burly guardian of the sleeping city stooped kindly over the little one and retied her hood with the tenderness of a father. Perhaps he was thinking of his little ones at home, and while he tied the strings, he looked down into the deep inquisitive eyes of little Tina and asked her what in the name of wonder took her out at that hour.

The child told him that she was going to Mother Clutch who was sick at a certain place and then asked him to direct her to the street.

"Why, it is across the city, little one," said the patrolman.

"Oh, sir, I will find it if you will only direct me. I will get to Mother Clutch and see what ails her."

"You? Why, you will get lost. Do you know what hour it is?"

"Yes, sir. I heard the clock before I left home. I always hear it strike, and I can't go back without knowing what is the matter with Mother Clutch."

The policeman gave the information, and then suddenly kissed Tina ere he dismissed her. Perhaps he kissed her for the little girl in his own house, for after Tina drew back, she was watched until she passed out of sight.

But all this time another person was watching the child with keen eyes.

Tina took no steps that were not seen by this man who had the watchfulness of a fox and the gliding motions of a serpent. He followed her up one street and down another while she picked her way across the city, letting nothing turn her from her mission, and when at last she stopped in half bewilderment and looked up at a house which stood on a deserted thoroughfare, he drew nearer than ever and with gloating eyes regarded her as a hawk watches a victim.

"It is here somewhere," said Tina, aloud. "The letter says Mother Clutch is sick on this street and I must be near the house. This is Number 88 and the next house must be the very one."

She was on the steps of a house and the man who had watched her so well was almost within reaching distance. Suddenly he strode forward, and Tina's first knowledge of his presence was his voice which struck her ears so suddenly that she turned with a little cry.

"Is that the house you want to enter?" he asked.

Little Tina looked at him and saw that his face was covered with a real black beard, and that his figure was rather tall and his eyes piercingly bright.

"I am looking for a sick woman," said the child.

"A sick woman, eh? Well, then you are right. That is the house."

Tina turned to the building with a joyful exclamation and her hand was on the knob.

"Wait. I live there and you shall go in with me."

"You live here, did you say? Why, then, you must know something about Mother Clutch."

"You are right, child; I know her. I am the doctor."

The man opened the door and Tina walked in, but in the hall she turned and looked up into the face now visible in the light that prevailed.

"This way," said the stranger, reaching out a hand and touching the little one's arm.

Tina noticed that he had touched her with the left hand. Was he left-handed?

"Is she in that room?" and Tina looked toward a door alongside the hall, while she was led toward it, and in a little while she stood in a chamber which was nearly dark, though she could make out some furniture, but no bed.

The door closed the moment she crossed the threshold. The room grew gloomier than ever, and the child, shuddering, and for the first time feeling real fear, turned toward the door, but it would not yield to her.

"Mother Clutch, where are you?" called little Tina. "I am here according to your request, but I see you not. The hand without the thumb was in the hall to-night, but it got no further. Oh, Mother Clutch, I am afraid I have fallen into a trap unless you let me find you very soon."

What had become of the man who had accompanied her into the house?

Was he outside listening in the hall, or had he stolen away to come back in a short time and conduct her to Mother Clutch?

Five minutes passed and the child stood in the dark waiting for the opening of the door which should show her a way to her god-mother. She felt her heart beat fast, and now and then caught a strange sound which at first seemed to come in from the street; but she was not sure of this.

All at once she sprung toward the door and threw herself against it.

"Mother Clutch, where are you? I am here—your little child, Tina, and you must let me find you or I will perish here."

"You shall perish here!"

She fell back from the voice with a wild cry, and stood white-faced and breathless in the dark. The voice seemed to have come from overhead, and she looked up expecting to see the speaker's face.

At that moment there opened in the ceiling a trap through which streamed a light which gave the whole room a ghastly appearance.

Like a statue of terror in the middle of the chamber stood the child gazing at the apparition overhead. It was not a face, but a hand. She saw it in all its distinctness; she caught sight of it the moment it came in sight and beyond it—nothing.

It remained in the center of the open place for nearly two minutes. It was surrounded by a singular light in keeping with that which pervaded the room, and ere it vanished the child with a shriek fell to the floor in a swoon.

She did not see the hand disappear; her body lying on the carpet was lifeless, and when the trap closed and the light and the hand vanished, Tina had become the victim of another game as dark almost as that which had been played against Number 99.

Presently the door of that room opened and a man stole in. He stood over the child and looked down at her with a sinister smile.

"One by one!" said he. "That is the way to work. They lived too near the man in the old den; this little thing saw too much, and she had a tongue that was dangerous. The letter fooled her as it fooled the old hag. The ferret on the trail will come to the same end, and then—then I will turn on the pair. A pretty time they are having of it in wealth and splendor. For twenty years Number 99 lived and hid from the police—for that long was his hiding-place a secret to all but a few. He was preparing to play a hand which would have overturned everything. In time Mother Clutch and this little thing would have baffled my hand; but now—Ah! I have scored another victory. Now let the ferret look out!"

He lifted Tina from the floor and carried her from the room. As the door opened and he passed into the hall, where a jet turned, the light fell upon the hand whose wrist was the child's pillow, and revealed the startling fact that it had no thumb.

The Thumbless Hand was still at work.

CHAPTER XIII.

A FRIEND'S DEMAND.

MAJOR RUBIO stood in the sumptuous library of his handsome residence.

It was the night after the last event we have recorded, and the light that bathed the room in soft beauty showed that the man was the sole tenant of the apartment.

Jorral Jet, the serpent-seller, had now returned to give Edna the shudders, and he had issued orders to the attendants of the house that no person with a dark skin and little eyes should be admitted under any circumstances.

"I will go to him when I want to see Joral," said the major to himself while he recalled the old man's last visit, and thought, perhaps, of the request he had made. I would kill Edna rather than see her his wife. Let him carry his desires a step further, and, despite his infernal snakes, I will turn on him, no matter what he knows, and play a hand that will show him something."

The bell rung as he spoke, sending its tones throughout the house, and as Major Rubio listened to the steps of the butler in the corridor, his face seemed to lose some color, and he watched the door with a good deal of interest.

"Who is it, Daniel?"

The servant crossed the room and threw upon the table a card, which Major Rubio picked up with some curiosity.

That the name was a strange one was apparent from the look he gave the card, and glancing up at the butler he asked what sort of man had presented it.

"He is a slender man with a beard, large hands and well dressed."

Major Rubio's eyes fell to the card once more.

It bore the name of "Micah Meek" and turning to the servant he gave orders for the man's admission.

"Micah Meek? I don't know the gentleman," said he, still watching the door.

In a little while there came toward him a man who with his gloved hand pulled to the portal, and then with eyes that seemed to twinkle came toward the table at which the major sat.

"You?" cried Major Rubio, almost quitting his seat as with distended eyes he stared at the visitor.

"Why not? You recollect the time we met last and I think I told you that I would call some time."

"Don't talk quite so loud. Edna may be awake or somewhere in the halls."

"The pretty one? Ah, yes, I wouldn't disturb her for all the world, and you know it, sahib."

"Leave off that title. She will surely overhear it. Now, go on."

The visitor was no less a person than Joral Jet, the serpent-seller, in disguise, and his little eyes that fairly snapped with triumph danced above the false beard with which he had adorned his face.

"What is it?"

Major Rubio was impatient. He wanted to get rid of his caller and his mien told Joral that he was a dangerous man at that very hour.

"What is it?" echoed the serpent-seller, leaning forward and intertwining his gloved fingers. "I am here to make a bargain with you. I want the pretty one."

"You want Edna, do you?"

"I want a wife. I have lived long enough without one, and in this land of the white people there is none fairer than the white girl."

"But you forget that she cannot love one of your race. In the first place, your business is repugnant to her—"

"I will empty the cages! I will kill all the little ones!" grinned Joral.

"That wouldn't give you a handsomer face nor lessen the hatred which the girl already has for you."

"She hates me, does she?" said Joral quickly and with a look toward the door. "In time she will love her dark husband. She loves you, sahib?"

"Alas, yes!"

"She will obey you, won't she?"

"She will."

"Then," said the serpent-seller, laying his hand on the table, "tell her that she must become my wife."

The face of Major Rubio, entirely without color now, confronted the serpent fiend with a look of half despair.

"You ask too much!" he cried. "You forget that this marriage would end the life of the child of my bosom."

"I want none other. I am here for the last time. You remember the night we stood in the shadows of the trees near the ruins of the seven-cornered temple on the banks of the Ganges and swore never to refuse one another anything."

"I have tried to blot that accursed night from my mind."

"But you cannot, eh? Very well. The time has come for my reward. I have asked for it before. I want the girl and I will kill my snakes."

"You will kill Edna, too?"

"We will risk that," and the face of the old man got a devilish grin.

He reached up and pulled from that face the beard he wore, showing Major Rubio the dark skin of the Indian.

"I knew you would not let me in if I came in my true skin," he went on. "I thought your servant would not know me with this beard on my face, but I am here, and I go not back to the little killers without your oath and your promise."

Major Rubio looked toward the desk in which he kept weapons as deadly as the hissing serpents in the old Hindoo's den.

"I am rich," said he.

"So am I," smiled Joral. "I am richer than you, and I care not for money. I want the pretty one."

The handsome man arose and paced the room, watched like a tiger in ambush by Joral Jet. He seemed to count the strides that carried Major Rubio from one end of the library to the other, and once, when he came back to where he sat, he bent toward him and said in the lowest of whispers:

"The other one is abroad. He is at work. He knows the secret and he has been killing to keep it safe."

In an instant Major Rubio stopped.

"Where is he?" he demanded almost fiercely.

"I know. The detective—the bounds of blood—are looking for him now, but, as yet, they have not tracked him down. He is abroad, I say."

"Have you seen him? Ah, I recollect. When you were here last you told me that you sold him a snake."

The speaker dropped into a chair and passed his hand across his forehead.

"Demand anything but this!" he cried.

"Ask anything at my hands but the beautiful creature whom this roof shelters. Edna your wife? It can never be!"

Joral Jet said nothing, but the lips meeting as the major finished told that the demand would not be taken back.

"I want the pretty one. I want to make her my wife," he said at last. "You will not refuse me."

Was Major Rubio the man who had sworn with Hagar the Dark that Ford Fox should never get to the end of his man-hunt weakening? Was he a coward in the face of this skeleton in red?

"Very well, I can go back," said Joral, rising and standing before the watchful man in the chair. "I can go back and let the other one play out the hand he holds. You know what has happened. You know that Number 99 is dead—you have read that he was found murdered in the den where he has hidden so long. You must know that in the land of the white people they hunt the doer of evil and that when they catch him they shut off his life. Think—sahib. The man who is on the trail may uncover something else. He may go back to the old crime and unmask the hands that had a hand in it. Do you want that done? I say, that this ferret may not only discover who killed Number 99, but he may find out why you wanted him dead."

A sudden start told that Major Rubio was listening to every word.

He went toward Joral Jet with the suddenness of a Jack-in-the-box; his hand closed on the Indian's wrist and with his eyes on fire he said rapidly:

"You know too much, Joral. You seem to know everything. You don't want to lose the wife you seek by seeing this detective reach the end of his trail. You can't afford to let him get there."

"Neither can you."

They were looking at one another, Major Rubio with startled terror and the Hindoo with a grinning face.

"Where is the pretty one?" asked Joral.

"Asleep."

"Call her down and tell her."

A bound brought Major Rubio to his feet and for half a minute he stood before the cool fiend in the chair and looked at him with the agony of fear.

"Call her down and tell her what?" he demanded.

"You know—tell her that I am her future lord."

"You will accept nothing else?"

"I will take nothing else from you in payment of the debt."

"Then, by the heavens above us! you shall never be paid!"

He spoke with the resolution of a determined, defiant man. His hands were seen to meet and his whole frame quivered visibly.

"Just as you say. I can go back to my serpents," said Joral with no signs of perplexity.

"I will go back and let things take their course. Perhaps this secret-finder will get there a little sooner and perhaps the hand which has no thumb will work out the puzzle of the past to his own satisfaction, at least."

Joral rose and picked up the mask he had thrown upon the table.

"You will not give me the pretty one?" he asked.

What a steely glitter there was in the major's eyes!

He seemed to be measuring the distance between him and his dark-skinned guest.

"Just as you wish," continued Joral. "The detective will reach the end of the trail, or Edna becomes the wife of Joral Jet."

Biting his lips till they bled, Major Rubio, completely in the power of this man, crossed the room to the hall door which stood ajar. He was followed by Joral with the tread of a cat.

"Where are you going?" asked the Indian fiend.

"I am going to call her down."

Did Joral Jet mistrust?

"No," said he, laying a hand on the man's shoulder. "You will send Daniel or her maid after her."

Rubio fell back from the door and for a second stood before the old demon with a gleam of desperate wickedness in his eyes.

"I will send Daniel up," said he, and going back to the table, he touched a call-bell and the agile figure of Daniel sprang into the room.

The servant while he waited for orders looked at Joral in no pleasant mood.

"See whether Edna is up, and if she is, call her down," said Major Rubio.

"There must be a new bargain if I give her to you," he went on, turning to Joral. "You must swear to become our ally."

"Against which one?"

"Against both, perhaps—the detective and the Thumbless Hand."

"I will become your ally. The snakes shall fight for the new cause."

Meantime Daniel had reached a door on the upper floor and in a little while there was the rustle of silk on the staircase. Edna, the beautiful, was coming down.

Major Rubio fell to watching the door with the whitest of faces. He no longer looked at his guest, but at the doorway in which, as he knew, the fair girl to be given to a veritable demon, would soon appear.

Edna came, but fell back as she was about to cross the threshold, for at the table with a grin of triumph on his face sat the evil genius of her life.

"Come in, child," said Major Rubio.

In another instant the girl advanced and as she stopped again, drawing back with her eyes riveted upon Joral Jet, Major Rubio finished his sentence.

"Come in and greet your future husband!"

There was a cry that startled Daniel in another part of the house, and Edna had fallen lifeless at the feet of the plotters.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FIRST LIVING LINK.

"I COULD have told you so," cried Major Rubio, glaring at the immobile Joral as he lifted the fainting form of Edna from the carpet. "You have pierced her heart as with a rapier. She will never recover from this announcement."

"You don't know woman," was the taunting answer. "She will come out of it in fine shape if you will let me touch her."

"You touch this child?" and the major drew back with Edna in his arms, and looked daggers at the serpent-seller. "By heavens! you shall never see her your wife. I care not what has passed between us—I care not what the man with the thumbless hand knows, nor how the death of the jail-bird affects my fortunes. This child shall not become your prey. I will kill her first."

"You? Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the dark-faced wretch as he glided toward Major Rubio and audaciously bent over the inanimate burden in his arms. "You kill her to keep her from becoming Joral's wife? I guess not, sahib."

Major Rubio would have handed Edna to the white faced maid who had appeared at the door if the hand of Joral had not interposed.

"I am not through yet. Tell that creature to go back to her slumber," and he covered the maid with his finger.

The frightened girl ran down the hall and almost fell in a swoon at the foot of the stairs.

"Listen to Joral. Without him the whole gang is lost. This detective will reach the end of his trail and you and Hagar will never win. He can't hang you for the murder of Number 99, but he can close in on both of you all the same. And yet you refuse me the gift I ask; you withhold from me that which is not yours."

Major Rubio bestowed a quick look at Edna.

"Quick! I am going, but the promise must be made. If you refuse, I will not be Joral the ally any longer, but Joral the enemy! I will turn my talents and my serpents in another direction. What are you going to do?"

"She shall be yours. I will see that she becomes your wife—"

"The silent oath and the Indian grip," cried Joral.

Their hands met above Edna's body and their eyes looked into each other for half a minute. As the hands fell apart, the old serpent-seller bent over Edna and would have touched his lips to hers if the hand of Major Rubio had not come between.

"Not yet! When she becomes yours you can kiss her, but not before!" he cried.

"Very well; but the time for that will not be kept off very long."

Major Rubio carried Edna to a sofa and when he turned toward the door he was alone with her, and the noise of footsteps in the hall and then the closing of a door told him that the fiend in red had taken his departure.

"At last. I knew I would bring him to terms," chuckled the man who went down the steps and plunged into the night. "I thought I

knew how to bring him round. It is all right now. The oath he will not dare break, and yet he said he would kill Edna before I married her! Ah, old Joral knows how to bring these white faces to his way of thinking. They can be netted every time!" and he laughed as he passed down the street, his slippered feet making no sounds on the sidewalk and his figure vanishing among the shadows of the midnight hour.

He went home, did this evil genius of more than one life. He let himself into the room where the serpents hissed and crawled in their cages, and at sight of him came to the bars and poked out their forked tongues, showing the fangs which carried with them certain death.

He looked at them a little while, playfully running his hands over the cages and laughing at their gyrations as they fought for the chance of touching that evil hand with their cold heads.

"Ah, my pets, I will sell every one of you before I take the pretty one to wife," said he. "I will see that you bring me a good deal of the white man's money and then I will have a wife as pretty as any of you."

He turned from the cages to hear a rapping at his door and when he opened it a man with a bushy beard and rather well attired came in without an invitation.

"It's pretty late for business, I know that," apologized the visitor as he glanced at the cages and then passed the nearest one in a manner which indicated fear of their occupants.

"What do you want?—one of the little ones, or would you rather bargain for the big spots yonder?"

"That depends," was the reply and the man took a seat and looked toward the boas wrestling in their large cage in one corner of the den.

"You want a snake?"

"Yes. If I can be suited, that's just what I'm after; but I don't know how to handle them."

Old Joral got down to business at once. He did not look beyond the chance of making money; it never entered his head that the man before him might have a double mission, and he never thought that, instead of a customer for serpents, there stood before him the keenest detective in Gotham.

"I want something that is certain," said the caller. "There must be no mistake."

"You pay for certainty," was the answer. "I never sell failures."

Joral Jet opened the top of one of the cages and took from the bottom with a peculiar book something that wriggled and nearly fell from the iron.

The man drew back with an apparent shudder.

He saw before him a little pair of eyes that had the glitter of emeralds and a body which was beautifully spotted and as shiny as a new lance.

"Will it kill if it bites?" he asked.

The guinea pig experiment was had over and as the dead animal, which had been mercilessly sacrificed, was thrown in one corner, Joral Jet even striking the head of the reptile.

"What is it worth?" asked the caller.

"Fifty dollars."

"That little thing?"

"Yes. It is better than anything else for secrecy. It leaves no mark. It bites and that is the end of it."

"But how do you know I want it to kill?"

"Not to kill?" and the eyes of the serpent-seller seemed to look at the man with astonishment. "What brings you here, sahib, if you don't want the little one to bite?"

"Ah, you're a shrewd one!" laughed the Indian's visitor. "They don't get ahead of you, I see, Joral. Fifty dollars? Do you sell many?"

"No. They don't want them as I thought they would. In other countries I sold them ten to one in this. They kill by other means in America."

"But aren't you afraid of the police? Don't they know that you deal in serpents?"

"They know it, but what can they prove? I profess to sell snakes with their poison killed before they leave my house, but, sahib, that would bring me but little."

"But the big ones in the other cage?"

"They never bite; they crush and that wouldn't do in this country, you know."

"Of course not. I want a snake, but I don't want a failure in fangs."

"Take this one, then."

"I can't carry him, can I?"

Joral opened the niche in the wall and took out the bottle from which he poured on an occasion which the reader remembers, that elixir which was to render serpent proof the man who handled the beautiful destroyers.

When he had explained the contents of the bottle, he took another guinea pig from a pen and forced down its little throat some of the elixir.

Then in a few moments he threw the animal among the serpents and the two men saw one of the snakes bite it repeatedly.

Seizing his opportunity, Joral snatched the guinea pig from the cage and held it up triumphantly.

"The proof, sahib! the proof!" cried he. "You will not be afraid now!"

"Shall I kill the serpent when I want it no longer?"

"Yes, kill him, sahib. There was a time when I made my customers bring them home, for India is a long way off, and I can't get them as readily as I used to, but now, as I contemplate going out of business, my customers can kill them when they are through with them."

"But did all your patrons bring the snakes back under the agreement?"

"Nearly all," said Joral.

"Did they ever keep their heads or tails for mementoes?"

The old Indian suddenly grinned.

"One," said he. "I remember that one snake came back without a tail. Ha, he was thrown into the den and wriggled to me, to die the next day. He couldn't live and he mutilated thus. But you can kill yours, sahib."

Joral's caller counted out fifty dollars into the old villain's hands, and looked toward the cage.

"Do you want the little fellow now, sahib?"

"Now."

Joral fished from a little cupboard a green bag with a draw-string, into which he placed one of the deadly reptiles, and threw the whole toward his patron.

"You won't bring him back, eh?" he said.

"I don't think I will. I guess I will keep this one."

With the money doubled in his fist, Joral laughed as the door closed on the figure that crossed his threshold; he laughed when he heard the man strike the street, and in another moment he was alone with the deadly beauties of his infamous den.

As to the man who had been the old wretch's customer, he threaded street after street, carrying in his hand the green bag which held the dreaded death of the tropics. He avoided the cars, and at last turned into a quiet street, where he entered a house to be faced by a young man who seemed to be waiting impatiently for some one's coming.

"You have it, I see. You have succeeded!" cried this youth. "Didn't the keen eyes of the old sinner penetrate your mask?"

"No, he was too eager to make fifty dollars," was the laughing rejoinder. "He would have sold me all the snakes he had, for he intimates that he is about to retire from business."

The face of the listener got whiter than ever.

"I see! The villain expects to win his game. He hopes to play the hand which is to make him the husband of the woman I love. But he shall not. This man, no matter what he does, and how great his mystic power, he shall not succeed. So I didn't kill him when I forced him against the tree? I thought the swoon might be a trick, and such it was, eh?"

"Undoubtedly. It was a trick which he learned among the jugglers of India. But let's look at the little beauty. Ah, you have the box prepared?"

Winton White, the dreamer, took from a shelf a box with glass sides and top. Opening the latter, he watched his friend drop the snake into the cage and then both leaned over the box and saw the serpent wriggle across the floor of its new home.

"It is the same kind he carried to me!" cried Winton. "See how the eyes glitter and how the spots show up in the light!"

"It is the same kind," was the reply. "This is the first real link. The tail of the snake which Mother Clutch found in the den of Hiram Harkness is the very counterpart of this one's. A heel ground off that tail on the convict's floor."

"Then, the man who killed Number 99 knows Joral Jet."

"Yes. He bought the snake of the old man and brought or sent home without the tail. The Thumbless Hand did that. I am ready to say that the hand which little Tina saw duplicate itself on the convict's wall ground off the tail of the serpent. It may have darted at him, you know."

"That is not likely. But, why should that man want to commit the crime of murder that night? You haven't discovered that, have you, for I?"

"No, but I will! One link at a time, Winton. I am now fairly on this trail of crime. This serpent is the first living link, but there are others and I will gather them all in!"

Winton White looked at the snake in the glass cage and seemed to shudder, as if at that moment he thought of its deadly powers.

CHAPTER XV.

OLD JORAL IS ROBBED.

If Joral Jet had suspected the real character and mission of the man to whom he sold the deadly reptile there might have been another scene in the house of the serpents; but he did not, and Ford Fox, the detective, carried off the object of his visit.

The dark-skinned suitor for the hand of Edna was not aware that the ferret had purchased the snake for the purpose of comparing it with the one killed by Winton White the dreamer, and also to compare the tail with the bit found by Mother Clutch in the room of the mysterious crime.

An hour after the detective's visit to the

serpent seller's den another person came down the street that led to it and rapped lightly on the old man's door.

This visitor looked like the one who had carried off a snake the very night of the murder and when Joral opened the portal and got a glimpse of the face there he smiled.

In walked the man and straight to a chair where he sat down and glanced at the cages.

"Do you want another one?" asked the serpent-seller. "You brought the other one home; but he had no tail."

There was no reply and the man in the chair looked at Joral while that individual seemed a little uneasy, and cast sly glances at the cages as if his strength lay in them.

"I don't want another snake; one's enough, I guess. You say I brought the other one home mutilated? Where is it?"

"It died."

"Under your care? I thought you knew how to take care of the little things. You haven't forgotten your cunning, eh, Joral?"

"No, but—"

"Never mind the excuses. I'm not here to hear anything of the kind. We'll come down to business at once. You recollect the life you led in India?"

Joral did not speak, but gazed at his caller as if he suspected that something, to him very unpleasant, was about to come to the surface.

"You were serpent-chainer and general mountebank there. You used to slip down the banks of the Ganges and perform for whatever you could get, but here you have advanced a step and sell serpents, whereas there you weren't permitted to do anything of the kind."

What was the fellow driving at? The old man wondered what all this meant and why he prefaced his business with such recollections.

It was true that he had been a juggler and mountebank; he had earned his crusts by the ledgermain of the East, and at last had crossed the sea to become a dealer in death in America. But did this man know him? By what means had he come across all this about his past?

All the time the keen eyes of Joral had watched the man's hands as he could see them.

He noticed that both were gloved, and that while they were not prominently shown, they were not purposely concealed.

"I haven't recalled these incidents in your career, Joral, to cause regret, for I presume you are happy here though this is by no means the land of India. I have called on a matter of business and now I want you to exercise memory a little while I recall something which will interest you."

Joral leaned back on his stool and waited for his caller to proceed.

"You have been here how long, Joral?"

"Twenty-one years."

"Ah, I thought so. You are almost a fixture, eh?—you and your little ones. In India they wouldn't have lived so long, for the mongoose would have found them."

"I kill the mongoose!" cried Joral with snapping eyes.

"Yes, I know that. You have been here over twenty years. You remember one Hiram Harkness, an American, don't you?"

"I remember him."

"You recollect that he escaped from prison to which he went for fraud and incendiarism. He set fire to the house which held his niece, the young girl whom he beggared when everybody thought him the pink of honesty."

The old man nodded, all the sign that he was listening.

"When this man escaped you harbored him."

"I?" cried Joral Jet.

"You harbored him. Don't deny that, Joral. He came to your house, the last place the police would have looked for him, and here he lived among these serpents or others just as deadly, till he changed his quarters for another den. Ever since you have known where he was hiding."

"You find out a good deal. You seem to know all this without asking me if it is true."

"Never mind that. Now, Joral, I want what he left with you. I want the package which Hiram Harkness confided to your care and for which he never called."

"He never left anything with me."

"You don't mean to tell me this, Joral? You don't mean to sit there and lie in that manner?"

"I am not lying. He never trusted me quite enough to let me keep anything of his."

"He didn't, eh? A man who lives with you while hiding from the police ought to be confidential. He left something with you, Number 99 did. I am here for it, Joral."

The old snake king wished that the wall behind him would open and let him in and beyond the reach of this cool man whose hand incased in the brown glove rested on his knees and seemed in the act of darting at his throat.

"Very well. If you will not be accommodating I can be relentless. I can open your life to the police; I can make trouble for you, Joral."

The serpent-seller was in a box. He seemed to writhe on the stool and his hands trembled as he glanced at the cages wishing, no doubt, that the whole tribe of reptiles could break out and make sure work of the villain who had called on him.

"I will take that package now, Joral. It is in this house—in this very room, and you will hand it over within three minutes."

"But, I tell you—"

"No more lies!" was the sudden interruption. "You will get me the package Number 99 confided to your care nearly twenty years ago."

Joral Jet rose and stood for a single moment in the light of his lamp.

"Did you know him?" he asked.

"Never mind that, Joral. I want the package. We will talk about the other matter at another time."

"What are you going to give me for it?"

"Not a penny."

"Oh, you are going to rob me, then?"

"Yes."

Joral Jet crossed the room, all the time followed by the man in the chair, and when he opened a secret niche in the wall and thrust in one of his dark hands he seemed to turn pale.

"Is this it?" he asked, turning to his visitor with a package in his grasp.

"Open it and let me glance at it a moment."

It was a small packet not over five inches long, and had been tied with a cord which had grown pale with age. The waxen seals had fallen off, but still everything denoted that the package itself had not been disturbed.

The serpent-seller broke the string and with his long fingers opened the packet which he laid on the table before the man who leaned forward, curious to get a look at its contents.

He picked up one paper and then another. He looked at the little locket which was wrapped in oiled-silk and even opened it for a glance inside.

All this time the eyes of the serpent-seller were watching him like the eyes of a hawk.

Joral could have flung himself across the table and seized the man by the throat, but he did nothing of the kind. Something seemed to hold him back from an act in which he might have taken great delight.

All at once the packet was shut up and the man thrust it into an inner pocket.

"That is it, eh?" asked Joral.

"I'll say so anyhow," was the answer, accompanied by a smile.

The old Indian breathed freer; he had been robbed and the robber was about to let him off.

"Now, Joral, how is the old companion coming on—the one you used to have in India?" he suddenly asked.

If a thunderbolt had fallen that moment at Joral's feet he would not have started more than he did.

"My old companion, sahib? I don't understand you now?"

"You don't eh? You haven't forgotten the old friend who used to follow you up and down India, the tall, handsome man who once held a commission, but who was fascinated by you and your black arts?"

"You mean the sahib?"

"Yes, though he isn't called that just now. He's got a pretty daughter, eh, Joral?"

"Yes, a pretty child."

"What does he think of the death of Number 99?"

There was no reply.

"He knows of it, doesn't he?"

"I don't know."

"You infamous old rascal, you make a lie do where the truth is wanted; this has been the leading characteristic of your dark life. You know that he has heard of the end of the jail-bird. You need not sit there and tell me that he knows it not. What does he say about it? How did he receive the news?"

"He was astonished."

"Ah, I thought he had heard of it!" grinned the serpent-seller's caller. "You have seen the girl?"

"I have seen her."

"She is said to have grown into a beautiful woman."

"She is the fairest flower in the white man's gardens."

"You talk like a person enraptured. You must have looked at her with eyes of love."

Old Joral showed his teeth in a grin.

"I know a pretty white girl when I see one, ha, ha!"

"And in your eyes this one is particularly handsome? Major Rubio, as he calls himself, calls Edna his child also?"

"She is his child," said Joral.

"Just as you like, old hypocrite; call her what you want to, but the truth remains, and will come out one of these days. What is Edna's fortune?"

"All that the major has will become hers."

"And consequently yours if you carry out your designs."

"If?"

"You!" almost hissed the caller. "You have designs against this girl. You have already played your hand and—"

A cry from Joral broke the sentence, and the next moment he had left the stool and was looking at the speaker with distended eyes.

"Sit down," coolly demanded the stranger.

But Joral stood statue-like in the middle of the floor, and his face suddenly assumed an almost ashen hue.

"You can't come any of your jugglery over me," continued the cool one. "If you play one of the tricks of the East and fall apparently dead at my feet, I will plunge a knife to your heart to see if life remains. I guess you understand this, so do as you please, Joral. I am here for business, and no amount of jugglery shall hoodwink me."

The serpent-seller swallowed hard. For once at least he had encountered his match.

"Now, old man, you will let the girl alone. If you bother her again I will show you a hand which you never dreamed I hold. You know as well as I do that Major Rubio has no right to give Edna to you, and if you take her at his hands—if you persecute her with the attentions which are repulsive to her—I will turn on you and become as deadly to you as your serpents have been to others."

The voice ceased, and the man with the gloves rose and stood before the terrified serpent king.

When he moved toward the door, followed by Joral's eyes, his tread was soft and his mien reminded the old man of the sleek tigers of the Bengal jungles.

"I know you," said Joral, hardly above his breath.

"I'm glad of that. Then we need not misunderstand one another. You know me. You think you can baffle me, do you? Try it, Joral of Bengal."

There was no reply as the old wretch watched his visitor depart, the door closing behind him without noise, and when he was on the last step leading to the street below, he sprang forward and caught up one of the cages.

Down in the hall burned a light which showed the serpent-seller the man who had coolly defied and even robbed him in his own den. In this light stood the visitor about to let himself into the street, and Joral leaning over the bannister with the cage of snakes swinging in his hand, eyed him with all the pent-up rage of a lifetime.

"Throw them down at me if you want to," came up to him from the foot of the stairs. "Don't waste any more snakes than you care to, Joral. You may have need of the forked tongues ere long."

He fell back and replaced the cage on the bench in the den, then shut the door, leaving his caller to get out of the house unhurt, while he (Joral) struck the table with his fist and vowed that his triumph should be one of brief duration.

He knew the man; the gloves had not deceived him, for, eying one of the hands closely, he had observed that the thumb of the right one did not move at any time during the visit.

"Now I will turn on you. Now I will pay you back!" cried Joral Jet.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE HAND OF HAGAR.

FORD FOX, the detective, with the living link which he had bought of the serpent-seller stowed away where he was at his command at any time, felt like a man who had achieved a victory.

He believed that the thumbless hand had carried to the house of Number 99 the serpent whose tail he and Mother Clutch discovered there the night of the crime. He was almost positive, also, that the serpent which he had purchased of old Joral himself was the mate of that deadly reptile, and the confession which he had obtained from the serpent seller to the effect that one of the snakes had come home minus a tail fastened the clue to the case.

After quitting the home of Winton White, the dreamer, the lover of Edna, he made his way down the street and at last paused in front of his own house.

Ford Fox went up to his room and sat down. The vanishing of Mother Clutch and the hunt which little Tina had instituted for her bothered him not a little, and the adventure in the old house near the river where he had seen the owner of the thumbless hand drain the last drops left by the revelers, had not left his thoughts.

For some time he wrestled with this puzzle in the solitude of his little room. It occurred to him that Winton White was getting better, whether through his resolution to break the force of the strange disease which had seized him or through some elixir he had taken, he could not say; but a change had come over the young man, and the detective believed that a chance for his complete recovery remained.

"The murder of the old convict is getting deeper," said he, while he occupied the chair at his table. "It is getting interesting, too, and the by-trails are as curious as the main one. Here is a man who escaped twenty years ago from Sing Sing. He was sent up for incendiarism—he a man who up to that time had a fair reputation among his fellow-men for honesty; he was respected by all, and the guardian of a niece who at the time had a fortune of her own. Hiram Harkness became Number 99 simply because he could not resist temptation; he took what was not his own, and then, to conceal the crime and make secrecy doubly sure, he set fire to the house and gave his niece a narrow escape from death."

"I just recall that crime, for I was beginning to take notice of events then. I remember seeing the portraits of Hiram and the girl in the newspapers of the day. After his escape these were republished, probably to assist the detectives, and I saw them again. That is why, I suppose, I have never forgotten that crime and the escape. Now, after twenty years Number 99 turns up, murdered in the den which he inhabited, hiding from the police as well now as then. He is found dead after the escape of the man who stole in upon him for the purpose of taking the convict's life. On the wall is found the impression of a thumbless hand, and a little girl saw it placed there by the owner thereof. Tina and her god-mother come very near being witnesses to the murder itself, and the old woman has already vanished. The little one goes out to look for her, and she may have fallen into the same snare that caught Mother Clutch."

These thoughts finding utterance while Ford Fox occupied the chair at his table, seemed to give him delight. It was his way of recalling the events of his trails, and in this manner he picked up new links and sometimes thought out the strange puzzles of crime.

"Now, there is the other trail," he suddenly went on. "There is the trail of the pair who want my life—the man and woman whom Winton White saw in one of his singular visions. I have tracked the man home, and he turns out to be Major Rubio, the rich gentleman who has traveled, and the father of a daughter whose beauty is known far beyond the house they occupy. When was that man married? I can't find any record of it. Mother Clutch, who was the nurse of Hiram Harkness's child, whom he left behind when he went to prison, tells me that this same man, Major Rubio, passed the house the night the babe vanished, and that he hasn't passed it since that she knows of. I have discovered this on the side-trail; I have found out that Major Rubio was once in India, and that while there he met Joral Jet, for the old Indian goes to the house to-day, which shows that their relations are still kept up. What is the cord that holds these men together? And who is the woman whom Major Rubio is in league with? I will know this. I will find her out. I will this night look after this side-trail which Winton White declares is so dangerous. I will look after the woman whom Major Rubio has linked with him for my destruction, because I have stepped upon the trail of the Thumbless Hand."

Ford Fox was, an hour afterward, in another part of the city.

It was not late and he was alone. The "side-trail" as he called it interested him not a little, and while he walked he thought that it might yield him another link almost as important as the serpent's tail.

But suddenly stopping midway on a block he saw a carriage halt in front of a house opposite and the following moment the door opened and a lady stepped out.

The detective saw the face for a moment and smiled.

"Winton White left nothing undescribed for he sees every point in his visions," thought the ferret. "That woman is Major Rubio's companion. She is the person who has vowed to help him brush me from his path."

By this time the person watched by him was on her steps and the door opening, admitted her, while the carriage was driven back empty.

Ford Fox crossed the street.

Hagar, the Dark, had barely entered the house ere the bell tingled in the hall and she stopped at once.

"Who is that?" she exclaimed. "Have I been followed?"

With her own hands she opened the door and stood face to face with Ford, the ferret.

"Did you drop this, madame?" asked the detective, holding up a handkerchief which he had taken from his pocket.

"It is not mine," said Hagar. "I never had a kerchief like that."

She was about to shut the door when something, a fierce desire, took possession of her.

"You are very kind to offer me what you think is my property," she went on. "I would like to have an errand performed, one which I forgot to impart to the driver who brought me home."

The detective was in the hall and the door was shut.

The light burning overhead showed him the cool face of Hagar and the depths of her black eyes. She was dressed in a garment which fitted her figure to a fault, and her hands, gloved in kids, were as neat as hands could be.

"Walk into the parlor for a moment. You will do me the favor I ask, for I came home without my wits, it seemed."

In the parlor alongside the hall, with the light showing him the sumptuous furniture, Ford Fox waited for Hagar to return, she having left him for a moment.

He had never before seen the inside of that house. That he was under the same roof which had sheltered the woman whom Winton White had seen in his strange visions he well knew, and she was the co-plotter of Major Rubio against him.

Several minutes passed and then the door opened, revealing the figure of Hagar as she came in.

In one hand she held a bit of paper neatly folded, and as she came forward the detective saw that the other hand was buried in the folds of her dress:

In an instant the thought of danger crossed his mind. This woman, though handsome and stately, was as dangerous as one of Joral's serpents.

All at once, and as the detective reached his hand out for the paper which Hagar grasped, something which had a glitter flashed before his face, and with the sudden spring of the leopard the woman was upon him. It was a leap which the most agile of men could not have foreseen in time to prevent it. She came at him with the dagger uplifted, and the ferret was thrown back against the table and then buried across the room toward the nearest wall.

"This is what I want to give you—this dagger!" cried Hagar. "You have followed me home! you are the ferret in the case—the cool head whose hands want to break the spell and throw us against the wall of death."

Ford threw up his hand and tried to catch the arm as it swept downward with the dagger shining in the light. He missed his mark, for the light blinded him, but then the next moment he had thrown Hagar off and avoided the blade.

Baffled as she stood a few feet away with her eyes looking daggers at him, Hagar spoke not, but continued to glare at the man she had failed to kill.

"It was a failure, madame," said the detective.

"I see that. I would have killed you where you stand only the fates were against me. You have tracked me home and you are the lynx in the game."

"In what game, madame?"

"Ah, you know. Here, let me fight you fair. Stand out there in the middle of the room and give me another chance. You think I won't try it again? You don't know Hagar!"

"Well, Hagar, you shall fail always. Don't you see that you should have played a different hand?"

"I see it now, but never mind; the next time there will be a better play."

"What makes you hate me and why do you want my life?"

She threw upon the table the dagger and saw it lie there with looks of rage.

"I will answer no queries of that kind," she cried. "I hate you and that is enough. I know you for the ferret who is trying to im-bitter my life and I will see that when you get to the end of your trail you get there powerless to smile the smile of victory."

"You make no concealment of your intentions, Hagar?"

"Why should I?"

"You will turn tigress, eh?"

"I am that now."

"I believe it. Well, Hagar, you will find me ready to meet you and your friends—"

"I have no friends," broke in the woman, her face coloring. "I am alone in this hatred."

"Then, the task you have assumed may be greater than you think. You should have an ally in this fight against the law."

She did not speak, but was looking at Ford Fox from across the carpet with her hands shut and her form quivering.

"Why should I have an ally?" she suddenly cried. "An ally to help me fight you? You will find Hagar against you in every move."

"But why?" smiled the detective. "When did I cross your path, madame?"

"I will not answer."

Ford Fox turned to the table and with a sudden movement snatched up the dagger which he held in the light a moment.

It was a bright blade with a black handle which in turn was carved with serpents and strange devices, showing great skill on the part of the carver. He saw that the top of the handle was the head of a snake, and that it was curiously hooded, like the pictures of cobras he had seen.

"Why didn't you go to Joral Jet for the deadly weapon if you wanted to finish me?" he asked.

Hagar started.

"I didn't know you were coming to my house to-night," she said.

"If you had known it you would have sought the serpent-seller, would you?"

"I don't know him."

"Oh, then this dagger, which is carved with the heads of Indian serpents, means nothing."

Hagar shut her teeth hard as if to keep back her reply and the detective glanced again at the dagger.

"It is yours. Keep it for the victims you have marked," and the black-handled weapon fell on the table with a clear ring. "Madame, you may fail in your plans; the hand which you have lifted to-night may fall powerless at your side one of these days. You will do well to keep out of this game. I don't ask you to abandon your friends, but I say here that I am bound to reach the end of the trail I am now on. You

know me, therefore concealment need not be had here in your house. You are Hagar; you are the friend and companion of Major Rubio; you two have vowed to brush me from this trail, and why? You don't want me to find the hand that killed Number 99; you believe that I may discover too much. Woman, you shall be baffled, for I will reach the end of this skein despite the daggers with black handles."

"Go ahead! Go out yonder and take the trail you have found!" cried Hagar, as with trembling hand she pointed toward the door. "We understand one another now. I am your enemy. From this moment you have against you a hand as subtle as a serpent, and as deadly!"

And Ford Fox believed her when he passed from the house.

CHAPTER XVII.

"NUMBER 88."

FROM the house of Hagar the Dark, the detective turned once more to a trail which he had left for a spell—the trail of Mother Clutch.

He was not willing to give up the search for the god-mother of little Tina, and, then, the child herself interested him not a little. He remembered that his first hunt for the old woman ended at the mouth of the subterranean passage which led him to the river, and he resolved, while walking from Hagar's house, to see if that trail could be followed beyond the opening, and also what had become of Tina who, as he knew, had said by letter that she had gone on the hunt of Mother Clutch.

The ferret went back to Tina's home, but discovered nothing which told him that the child had returned. The letter which had been thrown into her room by the man with the mutilated hand had decoyed her off; but this was not known to the detective, and when he left the place he was undecided which way to go.

Why not try again the house to which the trail of Mother Clutch had led him?

If the same hand which had decoyed the old hag from home had played a like game against Tina, would he not find traces of her in the same place? But he would try another plan first.

If the child had gone out upon the hunt of Mother Clutch, childlike she would be likely to ask directions of the first policeman whom she encountered, and in a short time he was talking with the very man who had tied Tina's hood the night of her adventure with the thumbless hand.

Jack Farrell remembered her distinctly. She told him that she was off on the hunt of Mother Clutch, and he recalled that he had directed her to a certain street the name of which he remembered, thanks to a good memory.

"But," said the eager ferret, "do you remember the number of the house? Didn't Tina tell you that she was seeking a certain number?"

Farrell reflected.

"She did, but I can't recall the number. I thought at the time—I'm quite sure of that—that she was going into dangerous quarters for a child."

"Then, you can't give me the number?"

"It was eighty something—that much seems right, but the exact number has escaped me."

That was something. In the eyes of the detective it was more than a beginning; it was the trail which must lead him to Tina, if not to Mother Clutch.

The night, growing older, found the man of clues at last on the thoroughfare designated by the policeman and in the neighborhood of the "eighties."

Narrowly he scrutinized the houses as he flitted past them, seeing here and there a light beyond the doors and windows, but one was as dark as Erebus.

He caught the number over the door and saw that it was 88.

Ford Fox crept to the very window of this house, and for a little time leaned against the dark weatherboarding. It was an old house, one which had withstood the winds and rains of many years, and its very aspect breathed of evil doings.

There was nothing to prove that Tina had been lured to that particular place. It was suggestive of crime, nothing more, and while the detective stood near it with the shadows of the trees on his face, and the whole street growing still, he wondered if he was not near the little object of his search.

Suddenly there came down the street and toward him two figures, and he drew back and hugged the house while he remained as silent as the sphinx.

"It's a queer street, and we see many odd things here," said one of the parties. "I've lived here a long time, and some of these houses, if they could talk, would tell tales good enough for a novel. Now, there is an odd trap which must have had a scene the other night."

"How do you know?"

"A little girl came here, and was about to ring the bell, if it really has one, when a man who seemed to be following her, came up and said something to her."

"Did you see it?"

"Couldn't help it, you know. I was coming along at the time and they attracted my atten-

tion because the child looked so innocent, and the man seemed so eager to get her inside. It's Number 88—an old place—and, from what I've thought for these three months, unoccupied."

"But it couldn't have been empty, else the child wouldn't have come here alone."

These persons were getting so close to the quiet spotter, that he could see that they were not very nice-looking people, though both were young and well-dressed.

"Well, did you wait to see if they came out?"

"Not I! It's no one's business any more what happens on this street, so I let everything I see here at night go. See?"

"Yes; that's right," and the pair passed on, leaving the detective unseen against the house.

What he had heard confirmed his fears. If a child had come to the door of 88, and there been accosted by a man, that little one was surely Tina and the man the decoy. If she had entered that place the chances were that the thumbless hand was at work blotting out the witness of the stroke in the tenement.

When the pair had vanished, Ford Fox turned once more to the old house.

It was as silent as ever, and gave forth no clue to the child's whereabouts.

He tried the door softly, but without avail. It was locked.

Then he went round to the rear of the house and effected an entrance there.

In the strange place he stopped and listened with his hand at the latch of a door which would lead him—whither?

All at once with a start the man of trails came to a halt and fell back against the wall behind him. A door had opened somewhere, but the darkness kept him from knowing where.

Perhaps, after all, the house was tenanted; perhaps the man who had deemed it empty did not know what he was talking about.

Another ten minutes passed. As the door which was unseen did not seem to shut, Ford Fox advanced across the room and stopped at the portal on the furthest side.

Suddenly a streak of light crossed his feet and he saw that it came from the adjoining room under the door which he was about to open if he could.

He did not open that door. A sound which kept back his hand fell upon his ears and as he recoiled he laid his right hand upon his weapon and stood on the defensive.

There were voices in the room just beyond the portal.

"I have given you the last alternative," said a man's voice. "I will have no enemy of your kind after me now. If you will not write to him I will touch the button which you see at my hand."

"I can't do that; that would not be right, for you want to entrap him for an evil purpose."

Ford Fox thought he recognized the last tones. They were childish and pleading, but a little one's all the same. He could see nothing; he knew nothing of the position of the parties beyond the door, but he believed that the man was trying to force the child to write a decoy letter to some one.

"You won't, eh?" said the man. "You won't write it, eh?"

"It would be wrong," was the reply.

"Don't you want to find Mother Clutch?"

"Yes, yes!"

"And of course you want to go back to the old house and be happy there again."

"It would be nice to go back. But the letter which was thrown into my room told me that Mother Clutch lay sick in this house and you said you were the doctor when you accosted me at the door. Why do you want me to write the letter to the gentleman?"

"Never mind that. I know what I am doing and I hold my finger at a button which, if pressed, will surprise you as you have never been surprised."

"I want to go back, but I would like to find Mother Clutch. Will I find her if I write the letter?"

"You will never find her if you don't."

"What do you want me to say in the letter?"

"You will write it, then?"

"Maybe. I can't do anything to harm him for he has been kind to us, and he is the man who is trying to discover the hand we saw on the wall of Number 99's den."

It was with difficulty that the detective kept back an exclamation at the end of this sentence.

Tina was beyond that door and the man who was in the game was with her. The little one was in the power of this infamous wretch who was trying to force her to write a decoy letter, or one which would help him on with his dark plans. The ferret even imagined that he saw the hand which was about to press "the button" and that it had no thumb.

"I'll get you paper," he heard the unseen person say. "Here it is now. Get ready."

A short silence followed and the ear of the detective was glued to the crack of the portal.

"Now, begin in this way at the left hand top corner of the sheet: 'Dear Mr. Fox:—I am watching over Mother Clutch who is very sick—'"

"Oh," broke in Tina's voice, "I can't do that. That is not true, and—"

The man laughed derisively and seemed to threaten the child.

"You can't, eh? Well, then, here goes the button."

"You want to bring him here, don't you?" said Tina. "You want to have him come to this house where I have not been permitted to see Mother Clutch."

"Never mind that. Proceed! I am watching over Mother Clutch who is very sick and I want to see you. I have some secrets for you and you must come at once—"

"I can't! I won't!" determinedly cried the little one. "It would not be right. Mother Clutch, if she were here, would not sanction this kind of work."

"Then, you little chit, you will suffer for your stubbornness," hissed the man. "You will not write as I have outlined to Ford Fox? Then you will never write to any one!"

"Help! help!" screamed the voice of Tina.

Already the form of the detective had drawn back and as the cry rung out, with all his might he launched himself against the door. He landed there with the fury of a cyclone and the old portal, which had been locked, cracked and fell in with a crash.

Ford Fox pitched headlong into the chamber which suddenly became as dark as Egypt, and the next moment he seemed to be falling down, down into a bottomless abyss.

It was an unexpected tumble, and when he landed and was thrown forward, to bring up against a wall, he wondered if every bone in his body had not been broken.

Some time elapsed before the ferret was able to pick himself up, and then he felt his body with gratifying results.

The fall had not even fractured the smallest bone.

Darkness was on every side and overhead. He could not tell how far he had fallen; he put out his hands and touched nothing.

The very silence was oppressive, but the ferret did not strike a match.

It seemed to him, from a noise which he remembered to have heard just after the breaking down of the door, that the floor, which must have parted by the pressure of the button, had closed again and he was a prisoner.

What had become of Tina and her persecutor?

Ford Fox felt his way to the wall of the dungeon. He stood there some time and then began to grope his way around the place. When his hands found a door set in the wall he stopped, and in a second he had torn it open, though not without a Herculean effort.

The passage which received the detective was narrow, and its ceiling low.

He pushed down it until he reached another door, which he kicked open, and it was then but the work of a minute to reach the street.

Ten minutes had not elapsed since his fall, and when he turned toward Number 88 he saw the front door open, and a man came out.

Ford Fox started after this man, and in another moment was once more a spotter on the trail.

CHAPTER XVIII.

EDNA SEES THE THUMBLESS HAND.

FORD FOX lost his man, but not until he had tracked him to a quarter not very far from Joral Jet's den!

The man vanished so quickly that the keen scent was half stunned, and when he tried to recover the trail it seemed more mysterious than ever.

"Now for Tina!" and he turned back and once more found himself in the old house, and at the very door which he had broken down by his plunge.

This time he struck a light, but search the house as best he could he was unrewarded, and the little one was not found. Every wall was sounded, the depths of the place into which he had fallen were searched, the attic and the cellars were gone over, but all without success.

Little Tina, the witness against the Thumbless Hand, was out of sight, and at last, after his two hours' hunt, the detective, baffled at every corner, was obliged to turn back disappointed.

Meantime, the man he had tracked from the house was at work in another part of the city. He who had vanished so completely from the eye of the ferret was playing a hand as cool as ever was played, and with the audacity of Satan he was facing a man whose face had changed color at his coming.

In the library of Major Rubio's house, with the light of the ten jets falling over his cool face, sat this very man, looking across a table at the major himself.

His hands he kept in his coat pockets and showed them at no time during the proceedings.

As to the major whose face seemed distorted while the man talked, he leaned back in the depths of his red arm-chair and toyed listlessly with a pen which he had taken up.

"You won't do that, will you?" asked Major Rubio, looking at his visitor.

"Why not? I want something more than money. I don't care a curse for the dross, but I do know a pretty face when I see it. You have foolishly promised the girl to this Indian wretch,

you know you have. You have agreed to sell her to Joral Jet, the serpent-seller, and he even now is laughing in his sleeve. What's the matter with me?" and the speaker laughed as he showed his figure to the best advantage.

"You are as cool as a devil."

"I have to be," was the reply. "Let me see, major. Twenty years ago you weren't fixed like you are now. When you came to this country from India with that old scoundrel tagging at your heels you weren't afraid of any one, for he had strangely spelled you and you were fool enough to think that his protection was all you should want through life. But now you need another hand to save you. You are in the old rascal's clutches and you have sold your daughter to him as he sells his deadly snakes."

Major Rubio listened; he could not do otherwise; he looked into the face of the man who spoke thus and seemed to wish that seas separated them.

"You can't get along without me," continued the stranger. "I came to see you to-night and to say this: I want to remind you that I am the secret keeper in this game. I know everything—more than old Joral does, and without me you can't win, and Hagar, the Dark, will go with you to the portals of justice."

"My God!"

"It is true. I came hither to say that without me you would be in the greatest danger from the man who is now dead."

"From Number 99?"

"From that man. You know this, major."

"Did you do it?"

A smile passed over the man's countenance; he looked across the table and even laughed in Major Rubio's face.

"Never mind. I am under obligations to you, anyhow," said the major. "I am sorry, though, that I can't accede to your wishes to-night."

"You can't, eh?"

"Really, I cannot."

"All right!"

The man stretched his limbs on the soft carpet and grinned maliciously.

"Just as you like," he said, looking back at Major Rubio as he turned to the door. "It's all one to me, my dear major. You are the doctor in this instance."

He opened the portal, watched by the man in the red arm-chair, and then threw one leg across the threshold.

He was coolness itself.

"What think you the city will say when it reads the true account of your varied career?" he asked.

No reply.

"What will it say when it hears that this old devotee of the Ganges—this devil in dark red, the seller of poison, was your friend in India? What will be said when it learns that you are not Major Rubio, but that, instead of such a person, you are—ay, what?"

He bent toward the major, his eyes on fire as it seemed, and his face devilish in its looks.

"It would be likely to believe you, wouldn't it?" cried Major Rubio, in a challenge.

"We will see who will be credited. The proof will be forthcoming and when it is out, I will ask you who predicted truest."

"Stop!" and Major Rubio bounded to his feet and threw out his hand as his visitor was on the point of springing from the room.

The cool head came back and dropped into a chair without taking from his pockets the hands still concealed.

"Be quick. I can't stay here all night," he said.

"In the first place—"

"I won't have it in sections," was the interruption. "What are you going to do? Out with it! Do you want me for an ally or for an enemy?"

This was plain enough. It could not be misunderstood and there need be but the one answer to it.

"I've enemies enough," said Major Rubio.

"I thought so. Any fool would know that."

"I want no more enemies. I don't care to know who killed Number 99. It was a good stroke whoever did it. The detective who is on the trail—"

"So you know one is there, do you?"

"Yes."

"He is on the trail, and if not stopped you know what he will do."

"I don't want any more foes. I want friends—"

"Yes, you show your good sense in that direction when you tie to the serpent-seller."

The major seemed to wince as the bolt went home.

"There was a time when we were nearer one another than we seem now," he said. "Yes, in other years we were friends and it does not seem natural to look upon you in any other light than that of friend and ally."

"That is true."

"We will be friends still, won't we?"

"That depends. It all lies with you."

"Then we will not be enemies. No, we'll be friends as of old."

"But you must throw this Jonah overboard."

"What Jonah?"

"Why, this one in dark red—this old slimy

Satan who has been fastened to you all these years of fear and crime. You must tell Joral Jet that you are not his slave any longer. You must cancel your promises to him—"

"He wouldn't hear of that."

"He must listen. I will be present while you tell him."

"You will?"

"I will come hither and listen to it all, and if he offers any objections I will see that he never handles another snake which kills. Your child his wife? What would the world say? You have given her to this man because of the secrets he carries. The other man carried secrets, too."

"Yes, but his lips are sealed."

"Right you are. Hiram Harkness will never give to the world what he knew. The story of the escaped jail-bird will never be heard outside prison walls. We can be friends and allies; we can march against this ferret and all the rest of them united, but not with Joral Jet in the league."

"Have it fixed to suit yourself," said the major.

"You will stand to the bargain, will you?"

"The one we make?"

"Yes."

"It shall be the one—the only one—kept."

"That is better—that is sense. To-morrow Joral will come hither; I will see that the serpent seller is lured to this house. You can send Edna away for the time. Send her to a friend's. We want to be alone with this man. We want to get all his secrets and then—"

"Then what?"

"Wait and see! Joral Jet is the old man of the sea to you. You have been his slave long enough and when he demanded the hand of Edna you dared not refuse, and why? Because he knows too much—this 'old fiend' does."

Major Rubio sat alone in the room from which the man had gone to other work. His departure had brought a strange silence which he did not care to break. He heard the sounds of garments that came down the stairs and floated into the room through the open door.

He turned his gaze to the portal and saw Edna there, white-faced and haggard.

"Is that man another of them?" she asked, coming forward. "Does he belong to the band which must own that Indian as its ruling spirit?"

"Why that question, child?"

The fair girl was standing before him and he saw how tensely drawn were her lips and how waxen-white her skin.

"I saw him when you did not," she went on. "I saw him stop in the hall and look toward this room with all the glare of a fiend. He stood on the same spot where the Indian stood that night, but this man took off his gloves."

"In the hall, Edna?"

"In the hall yonder. I saw him for I was at the top of the stairs and he did not see me. He took them off, I say, revealing a pair of hands dark and long—something like those of the Indian's. I fell to watching him with curiosity which I could not keep back; and he seemed to increase in stature while he stood in the light. Suddenly he drew up his right hand and covering yon door seemed to hurl at you an anathema which I almost read from the motion of his lips. But the strangest thing I saw was that the hand held out had no thumb. It looked so odd without the member, but as I live, there was no thumb."

Major Rubio had not interrupted the white-faced girl. He heard her through without stirring and when she had finished, he even smiled as though a part of her discovery was not new to him.

"Child, a man without a thumb may not be so bad as he looks," he said. "He might make a better husband than the dealer in serpents."

What did he mean? Edna threw her hands to her head and for a moment pressed them against her temples.

"He might! he might!" she cried. "Anything but your compact with that dark man."

He leaned forward and his hands suddenly drew her to him.

"If that is true there may be a change," he went on. "If you would rather wed the man you have just seen, you may be happy yet."

Her eyes fell to his face and for a moment she seemed to look through his own orbs to his inmost thoughts.

"Merciful heavens! is there no escape from a fate of this kind?" she exclaimed. "Must my very soul be bartered in this manner to some guilty person? What is the secret, papa? What is the dark crime which this infamous bargain covers? Can't you break the web of strange power and escape from the bands of these men? Are they friends—Joral Jet and the Thumbless Hand?"

She withdrew from his grasp and stood erect in the center of the room.

"I will not choose!" cried she. "I will promise nothing. You are determined to sell me to keep some secret. Do as you please, but remember that whatever happens, the secret will come out and the guilty punished. Good-night! When this man or the other one comes back, I will be here!"

She advanced to the door, looked back at him a moment with clinched hands, even smiled, and was gone.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE SPHINX-LIKE FACE.

HE of the thumbless hand was far from Major Rubio's house when the scene took place between him and Edna. The strange man wanted by Ford Fox was as cool as a summer's morn, and when he had gained a certain house he took a key from his pocket and entered.

If he had played a winning hand at the house of Major Rubio, he has also won a toss in the game of life. He had tempted the major to discard Joral, the serpent-seller, and when the Thumbless Hand reached home he laughed aloud to himself.

"Now we will see if he keeps faith with me," he exclaimed. "We will see how far this man goes with his promises. He will see Hagar, the Dark, and unless she persuades him to break his pledge with me, he will keep it. What will Hagar do? Can't I manage to see this woman? We haven't met for years, though she has not forgotten me. I will see how she looks and how she receives an old acquaintance."

Ten minutes later he had donned his hat and was out on the street again. There was something wonderfully cool about this man who must have known that he was the quarry which the detective was intent on running down, as well that without him the man known as Major Rubio could never see himself at the end of the plot which was being hatched between him and Hagar.

Hagar was not looking for this man. She had told the detective that she was his enemy; she had looked him in the eye and told him that from that hour he was to have a person at his heels imbued with all the hatreds of a lifetime, and that if he escaped the dagger which he had seen in her hand, he would feel like congratulating himself.

The woman, looking for no caller at that hour, started when she heard the sounds of the bell in the hall, and when the door opened and showed her the man on the step, she recoiled, and for half a minute stared at him as if she had seen that his coming boded her no good.

The Thumbless Hand was taken to the parlor, where Hagar turned upon him with her eyes ablaze and her face wonderfully white.

He sat down, crossing his legs coolly, and seemed to study the face as he saw it in the gleams of the light.

"When did you turn up?" suddenly asked Hagar, the Dark.

"Why shouldn't I turn up at any time? Come, woman, you did not think I was dead, eh?"

"You dead? Not such good fortune as that. No, you were not dead, despite my dreams."

She came forward with her eyes riveted upon him, and her hands hanging at her sides and tightly shut, as he could see.

"It's been how long, Hagar?" said he.

"I don't care about having the past recalled. It will do no good. What do you want?"

"Nothing very much just now. I thought I would drop in and see you."

"That's clever, I'm sure."

"I have just seen him, and he is as cool-headed as ever, but just now he is letting a fool play him against fate."

"What do you mean?"

"He is letting Joral, the old serpent-seller, fasten to him with the full intention of dragging him down."

"This dark-skinned wretch who has been the bane of more than one life, should not breathe the air he breathes now!"

"How would you stop him, Hagar?"

"How? You know."

"With the black-handled dagger?"

"With that if he could not be stopped any other way. You know who Joral Jet is; you know what he knows, for I know you and something about the secrets you keep."

There was a smile at the listener's lips, and for a moment he did not reply, but watched Hagar, and saw that she was deeply interested and talked with spirit.

"Joral is playing a hand now," he said.

"Of course. I have gone to the major and warned him, but the spell which this person has woven round him is as strong as steel. He is in that man's power."

"But we are going to break the spell."

"You two are?"

"Yes."

"Can you do it?"

"We can try."

For a moment Hagar was silent; then she leaned toward her caller and studied his face.

"And your reward is to be the girl, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"I thought so! He has promised her to Joral. Did you force him to break his word with that man?"

"He will break it."

"When?"

"To-morrow."

"Then, you must watch the child, Edna. With the promise broken, her life won't be safe a moment. You don't know this dark-skinned

villain as I do. He has his serpents, and they are sure death in his hands. He will not sell one of them to you—"

A sudden smile interrupted Hagar the Dark, and she wondered what it meant.

"I have never been to his den since I came to this city," she went on. "I saw enough of the old mountebank in another part of the world, and though he knows where I live, and I am aware of the location of his den, we have not met for years."

"That is strange, Hagar."

"You may think so. I despise this man. I know what he knows, and when I heard that he had forced Major Rubio to give him the hand of Edna, my blood stopped for a moment, and I thought of invading the den and slaying the old wretch among his snakes."

"No need of that," said the Thumbless Hand.

"To-morrow we will play a hand against him."

"Where?"

"In the major's house."

"Will he come there?"

"Why not? He will go wherever Edna is, and instead of kissing his future bride, he will be forever divorced from his serpents."

"Can you assure me of this? Can you sit there and tell me on your oath that the career of the Bengal tiger ends to-morrow?"

"It shall end then!" cried the Thumbless Hand emphatically. "It is drawing to a close now and the sun of to-morrow will set on the last play of the old serpent king."

Hagar laughed a laugh of triumph.

"You fill me with hope," said she. "You lengthen out the thread of my life and enable me to look ahead to years of peace. But there is another enemy; there is on the trail or rather in our path a man who may give us trouble."

The Thumbless Hand beat the carpet with his foot.

"You mean the shadower? You mean the man of clues?"

"Yes, yes."

"He is easier disposed of than Joral Jet," was the answer. "He will not be on the trail long."

"You speak confidently."

"I have a right to. This man has been seen. Queer, isn't it, that he should give you trouble?"

"Doesn't he trouble you as well?" asked Hagar.

There was no immediate reply. She saw the man shrink to the depth of the sofa he occupied, and her keen eyes watched the hand which, although gloved, she saw had no thumb.

"He never gave me much uneasiness," he said at last. "I have never been bothered much by these bloodhounds of the streets of New York. I can brush them aside whenever I am tired of them; but I like to be shadowed now and then. It adds zest to life and then you know it keeps one on his guard."

"I know that, but there is no telling when the hand will close. You can't look ahead and foresee the grip of the iron fist. I never could."

"No, you never could; that's a fact, Hagar. You have been unfortunate, but I won't refer to the misfortunes of your career. Yes, I know who this man is and when he trails. I will look to him; but Joral Jet first."

"I read all about the strange taking off of Number 99," continued the woman. "I saw what the newspapers said about the red hand on the wall and I know at once—"

"You knew what?" broke in the Thumbless Hand. "What did you know, woman?"

"Why, I thought—"

"What did you think?"

Hagar stopped; she was looking at her visitor and her tongue seemed glued to the roof of her mouth.

"Seems to me you guess at a great deal in life," he resumed. "You say you read the accounts in the papers and you know or thought—What?"

"I—that is," stammered Hagar, "I had a right to suspect—"

"That the red marks on the wall were made by this hand?" and the thumbless hand was thrust out and for half a minute Hagar looked from it to his eyes as if she would read through them the very secrets of his soul.

"I think I know what you thought, woman. You assumed from what the papers said and from the fact that this hand is thumbless, that I visited Number 99, and that when I came away the jail-bird was dead. I can't see through a stone wall but I can see over. Come, Hagar; be fair with me. You have accused me of murder down in your heart and now you try to deny it."

Hagar crossed the room and stood for a little while at the window there. She seemed to know that she was followed by the searching eye of the Thumbless Hand and when she came back, looking at him immovable on the sofa, she was whiter than ever.

"I won't accuse you of anything if you will promise to rid us of Joral Jet," she cried.

"I have told you what is to take place to-morrow."

"But the old rascal is as cunning as his serpents. He might slip through your fingers."

"Through these fingers, Hagar?" he cried, holding up the fatal hand again. "Look at them. When did anything living ever slip through them?"

"Never, I think," cried Hagar.

"You are right; but, Hagar, I want to say this. You are glad that Number 99 is dead, eh?"

"I am. I won't conceal this joy from you."

"I thought not. But don't you know, woman, that if the trailer strikes the right trail, there will be trouble for both of you?"

"We know that."

"And you have plotted against him; you have taken the old oath which binds both of you?"

"The oath has been taken. Why, man, you know everything."

He smiled and dropped his hand on the back of the sofa.

"Hagar, beware of this man who is your ally. I warn you now."

"What, I beware of Major Rubio? We have been friends these years, and what is for his safety is also for mine."

"True. But beware of him. You must watch this man. I can't help you as against him?"

"You can't. I won't need your help. I will fight my own battles in that direction. Let me see: To-morrow you entrap Joral Jet, the serpent-seller; to-morrow you will also trip the detective and then we will be safe!"

"That is a little in the future, but both these prophecies are certain of fulfillment."

"A thousand thanks," and Hagar, the Dark, came forward and put out her hand. "Twenty years ago a man escaped from Sing Sing. He lived in hiding from the police until a band which made no mistake found him out and he died. Death overtook him at last. This man who had outwitted the detectives and the police, died in his den and the man who found him there found also—so the newspapers tell us—the clue of a thumbless hand on the wall. If he hunts down the maker of that mark—if he is as cool and successful as they say he is—he will score another victory and my friend will wish, perhaps, that he had not left the clue behind."

"Your friend, Hagar?"

"Yes, the man who killed Hiram Harkness could be nothing else than my friend," and the woman laughed as she looked into the face which regarded her from the sofa.

There was no confession, no denial; the face was as sphinx-like as ever.

CHAPTER XX.

THE SERPENT THAT SPARED.

"WHERE am I? In the name of heaven, what followed the leap of the man who broke down the door? I saw his face a second ere the light went out and the man who was trying to make me write the letter intended to decoy the detective caught me up in his arms and that's all I know. Where am I now? In what sort of place am I with the air close and everything dark? What has become of Mother Clutch, and was she really in that house to which the letter thrown into my room decoyed me?"

The speaker was a child, who stood against a wall which she could not see, for the blackness of darkness prevailed and she almost suffocated.

Tina, the old woman's *protegee*, remembered the leap of the detective when he broke in the door of her prison and confronted her with the Thumbless Hand, and on the eve of penning the letter calculated to deceive the ferret despite his cleverness. She recalled, too, the sudden flight of herself in the arms of some one from that room. Now she was elsewhere; she was in a square little chamber where the walls were cold and invisible. She could feel them, but her sharp eyes were not equal to the task of seeing them, and she had fallen back from the effort already put forth in that direction.

Mother Clutch was still missing and her fate was unknown to the child. She believed that the Thumbless Hand was about to finish her because fate had made her a witness to the marking of the wall of Hiram Harkness's den—to the printing there of the dread hand which had undoubtedly taken the jail-bird's life.

Tina was hungry and the longer she waited in the dark place the keener grew her hunger.

All at once as she turned to the opposite wall for the fiftieth time a door was seen to open because when it opened a flood of light which almost blinded the child streamed into the place and a hand which carried a tray was thrust inside.

Tina saw a pitcher and some meats on the tray and springing forward with a cry of joy she took it from the hand, but stood spellbound, forgetful of her hunger and looked at the hand which had come to her relief.

There was nothing singular about the hand, only it was gloved and the child looked at it while she stopped, hoping to get a glimpse of the face beyond it, but in this she was disappointed.

"When will you let me out?" pleaded Tina, springing to the opening and showing her face there.

A laugh was the answer and she drew back feeling down in her soul a thrill which she had not felt since the detective's leap against the door.

"Don't let escape keep you awake," said a voice, evidently disguised from the emphasis. "It will never come, little one. You are liable to grow old and die where you are."

Little Tina uttered a cry of terror and sunk back.

"And Mother Clutch? Does she know where I am?"

"She knows nothing. Go back to your breakfast and be a good girl."

To her breakfast! It was morning, then—the morning of another day, and she had passed a night in that place.

This was news to the little captive, and when the door shut and the room became as dark as ever, she sat down to the meal with a heavy heart and fell to with a zest sharpened by real hunger.

All at once Tina stopped and pressed her hands to her forehead.

"Mother Clutch knows not where I am because she is dead!" she exclaimed. "That is what the man meant. That is what he did not try to conceal from the way he spoke. The dead know nothing of what is going on around them and Mother Clutch being dead—killed, perhaps, by the very hand that decoyed me—knows not where I am. This is the work of the hand I saw make its mark in Mr. Mystery's wall, and because we saw it there we have been hunted down, and the world will never know what has become of us."

The breakfast was finished, and little Tina felt stronger. The water was refreshing and the meat wholesome, and Tina, rising, went to where she thought the door had opened in the wall and found it after a brief search.

It was set in the wall as neatly as you please, and her hands could not move it. She worked till her fingers were sore and bleeding, and when she gave up, a sigh escaped her and she stood in the dark wondering what would be her next adventure.

The hours dragged their slow length over the little one in the stygian gloom.

It seemed to Tina that night was near at hand for she felt drowsy, and throwing herself on a heap of rags in one corner of the den she yielded to the wooings of slumber and became oblivious of what was passing around her.

When she opened her eyes she was aware that the door in the wall was open again. The light almost blinded her as before and for some time she lay on the pallet and watched it covertly through the straws of her pillow.

At first she saw nothing, then a hand was thrust through the opening and approached the floor till it found the tray which it lifted. Tina saw all this and continued to watch the hand until it had removed the remains of her feast.

Suddenly the hand came back, but this time it held something which the fist seemed to clutch with energy.

Tina's heart stood still when she saw that this thing wriggled just like a snake does when clutched about the head by a determined hand.

She saw the hand thrust once more into the dungeon and when it was withdrawn it clutched nothing.

At that moment she thought of what Mother Clutch had told her about the serpent's tail found in Hiram Harkness's den.

No wonder the child felt her blood run cold as ice through her veins; no wonder she thought of the deadly poison of serpents and that the one placed in the dungeon with her had been carried thither for her death by the Thumbless Hand.

Beyond the door in the wall she caught a glimpse of a human figure, but the face thereof she could not see. The hand had been withdrawn, and while she shamed slumber she saw the door close and then realized again that she was alone in the dark with a snake whose bite might be death.

The poor child shuddered and tried to bury herself in the straw when she thought of her situation; she thought of crying out for help; but thinking that her cry would reach no ears but those of the wretch who had deliberately brought the serpent to her, she kept quiet and sealed her thin lips.

Little Tina now lay still and listened for what she could not hear—the crawl of the deadly reptile.

She listened with all ears and tried to pierce the darkness in order to watch the snake, but this was impossible; she did not possess the owl's eyes and could see nothing.

"I will lie right still," thought she. "Perhaps the snake won't find me if I do. It can see in the dark, but it may seek some corner and stop there. I wonder if the wretch who threw it into the chamber has a heart. I—"

She stopped as if a hand had found her throat and shut off her words. Something had touched her foot; something had crawled across her ankle and she felt, as it were, the sting occasioned by the scales of the snake of death.

With her heart thrown into her throat by this contact, Tina drew back and then held her breath. The snake had found her; it had actually crawled across her flesh, had touched her, and left perhaps on her limb a mark as deadly as the one she had seen on the wall of Hiram Harkness's den.

For more than ten minutes—it seemed a whole hour to the child—she waited for the sting of the reptile. She lay on the couch, stirring not, but

listening for it, as if she expected it to move the straw in its march of death; but not a sound stirred the silence.

Where was the serpent?

Little Tina, filled with nameless dread, but all the time connecting with the death-snake the Thumbless Hand, felt her blood as cold as ever in her body. She would have struck a match if she possessed one, but as she did not, all she could do was to wait for the poison and its workings.

Slowly again the door in the wall opened.

Mother Clutch's little *protegee* lay still and watched the light as it streamed into the place and fell upon the ground. She saw at the opening a face which she had seen before—the face of the man with the maimed hand!

The eyes of this man looked into the room and seemed to scrutinize her as she lay quiet on the straw as if stricken by the fangs of the serpent.

Tina stood the inspection for some time, or until she felt that she could endure the agony no longer and that she must cry out and break the spell.

Presently the hand she had seen before came into the place and the fingers snapped curiously. Something glided from near her head and wriggled toward the hand.

It was the serpent.

Tina watched it, fascinated as it were, while it approached the hand and lifted its slender body from the ground until its head was near the gloved fingers. The snake was going back to its master.

Suddenly the hand darted at the snake and closed about it just below the head. Tina saw it lifted from the ground and withdrawn. Then she saw the man in the adjoining room bend toward the light and look into the snake's mouth which he had forced open till the tongue protruded and the emerald eyes snapped.

"Did you do it?" she heard him ask the snake. "Did you finish the meddler? Hal I believe you did. Good boy, you! Ah, you shall have milk for this."

The child breathed free once more. She saw a hand put out and the door shut again, but not until the light had been across her face and the dark eyes of the Thumbless Hand had watched her on the straw with the gleam of a demon in them.

She was in the dark again, in the eyes of the strange man bitten to death by a serpent—put out of the way and, like Mother Clutch, no longer a living witness of the crime of the jailbird's den.

She now heard footsteps in the room beyond the wall; she heard a door open and shut, something she had not heard before.

This took her across the room; she reached the door in the wall and found a crack there. It was barely ajar and when she caught up the sharp stone which she had found in the dungeon, she found that she could open it.

Tina worked with a will until she had opened the door, and with her hands on the sill and a prayer of hope at her lips, she lifted herself up and then lowered her body into a room just as dark as the one she had left.

It was like getting back to life to the little one.

Tina stood for some minutes in the room and when she had recovered her breath she found another door which was locked.

"I thought so!" cried the child. "But this door, locked as it is, shall not keep me from the open air."

She searched the room till she found a window, one pane of which she broke out and in less than five minutes she stood in an alley with the wind of the night blowing on her white cheeks.

Free at last! Thanks to the serpent which the man believed had killed her, Mother Clutch's *protegee* was beyond the dungeon and still the living witness of a crime. She looked in every direction fully expecting to see loom between her and the nearest lamp the figure of the Thumbless Hand; but it did not come.

Tina started away at last.

"I dare not go back home, for he may be there," said the child. "I must seek another asylum and why not go to the detective?"

Yes, why not seek the man of clues and tell him in her own language how she had escaped the machinations of the man whose hand she had seen in red on a surface of white?

When she left the alley she looked on every hand, but no one seemed to be on her trail now. The Thumbless Hand was not in sight and Tina ran away with a cry of joy.

It was fully thirty minutes later when she stopped in front of a building and after looking at it a moment, she ran up the steps in the hallway and knocked nervously and hard on a door. Footsteps crossed the floor beyond the portal, and when it opened little Tina sprang forward and paused in front of Ford Fox, the detective, and the best friend she had in the wide world.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE THUMBLESS HAND ARMS HIMSELF.

To Ford Fox, the ferret, the return of little Tina was like the sudden resurrection of the dead.

He folded the child in his arms, and when he

had recovered from the surprise, his first question was about Mother Clutch.

"What, have you not found her?" asked the little one.

"I have not. I thought that perhaps you had seen something of her in your wanderings. But, sit down, Tina, and tell me everything. We have the whole night before us."

The child did so. Her story, which we need not reproduce here, was attentively listened to by the detective, who already knew some of it himself, and when she had finished he looked at her a moment as if admiring the courage which had taken her from the last place of her captivity, and her adventure with the serpent.

"It was the same hand I saw make its mark on the wall of Mr. Mystery's den," said Tina. "It had no thumb, you know, for you saw the red mark. Well, this hand was mutilated in the same manner, and therefore it must be the same one."

"And do you think, Tina, that it has dealt with Mother Clutch?"

"I'm afraid it has," was the reply. "I am afraid that Mother Clutch has fallen into a deadlier trap than that which caught me."

The ferret said nothing. He recalled his own trail which led him through the old house where he had seen the Thumbless Hand drinking the remains of the revelers' feast, and thence to the dark passage which terminated at the river.

"I sha'n't believe that Mother Clutch is dead till I have some proof of it," remarked the child. "We have been friends too long, and she has been so good to me. She must turn up some time, despite the dread I have. You will find her for me, won't you?"

It was an appeal hard to resist, and Ford Fox told Tina that he would find Mother Clutch if possible, and with these words in her ears the tired child lay down on the detective's couch and fell asleep, while he sat and watched her to the small hours of the night.

Ford Fox saw that the net was being spread by the Thumbless Hand for all those who were likely to do him injury. He had picked up several links of the chain which he was forging for the guilty, but now the whole thing had a dangerous look, and when he thought of the serpent which had been thrown into the cell for the purpose of taking Tina's life, his hands shut, and he promised himself, while he watched the little one, that the scheme should fail and the guilty pay for their work.

Tina slept long into the next day. When she awoke she looked around with eyes full of astonishment, for she remembered having fallen to sleep in the detective's room; but now she was in a different looking place, and a young woman with a pleasant face was sitting at the window, watching the passers-by.

"Who brought me hither?" asked Tina, at which the person at the window rose and came over to her.

"A friend, little one," said a soft, kind voice. "He did not like to leave you where you fell asleep, so he brought you to this house, where I am to be your friend till the change is made again."

"Who are you?"

"I am Susan—Susan Blackie. I am the detective's friend, and he has seen fit to trust you to me for awhile. You are Tina and his friend, which is all I want to know."

"Where is he?"

"Ah, that is a hard question to answer," replied Susan, with a smile. "One cannot tell where that man is. All I know is that he is a detective, and that he is generally on a trail, as he calls it. We have been friends a long time, for I owe him my very life. God bless Ford Fox."

"Ay, I say that, too!" cried Tina, reaching out her hand and resting it on Susan's wrist. "We will get along very well together, I'm sure of that. He is off somewhere looking for Mother Clutch. You don't know her?"

Susan shook her head, and Tina proceeded to explain.

Meantime the detective of Gotham was in another part of the city looking into something that promised results; he was picking up a dropped link of the chain, and in an exciting manner.

In a room which was on the second floor of a certain building sat a man whom we have met before.

He was quite alone, but the chances were, from what was to be seen in that room, that he would have company ere long.

He was a person who could be called good-looking, though his deep, sinister gray eyes were indicative of dark cunning, and the hand which rested lightly on the table before him wore a glove.

It was the right hand, and where there should have been a thumb there was a strange blank.

The Thumbless Hand was at home!

Whatever this man's name was, he was in the den which he inhabited, and, being alone, could sit and smoke just as he was doing after his night adventure with little Tina and the snake.

The morning was well advanced, and the man in the room was looking now and then toward the door as if he expected to receive a visitor from the outside world.

"This is the day when we catch the old serpent-seller!" he said at last aloud to himself as he blew a smoke ring toward the ceiling, and then for a moment watched it float there. "We are going—or at least I am—to show this man that his game is at an end, and that he can't play out the cards he holds. Will he come to the trap? Will the bait I have held out be sufficient to lure him to his doom? We shall see before long."

The door moved at this moment, for a hand outside had turned the knob, and when the Thumbless Hand crossed the room and unlocked it, he stood face to face with a little humpbacked man whose eyes had a peculiar glitter.

"So you're here at last are you, Fider?"

"I'm here. Got knocked down on the street by a cart and had to stop awhile. No bones broken, you see, so I'm right side up with care again."

The face of the speaker was rather dark and there was about it something so un-American as to render the man likely to be judged a foreigner. He came forward and took a seat opposite the Thumbless Hand.

"Go over yonder and look at the snake in that box," said the Thumbless Hand.

Fider went to where stood a small box with a glass top and bending over it for a moment watched the antics of a greenish-bued snake that ran around its prison as if eager to get at his hand.

"Is that one of the deadly ones, Fider?" asked the man who was watching as keenly as ever.

"It is one of the killers of the Indian rivers."

"You've seen them, then?"

"A thousand times."

"But you have never been to Joral's den?"

"No, I have never bothered the old rascal."

"Now, Fider, you are my friend and I have promised to play fair with you. What is this wonderful elixir which the old fellow takes whenever he wants to bring about those strange results? I mean what does he take, or how does he play the game which so ably counterfeits death. Is that secret his alone?"

Fider smiled and leaned across the table.

"It is not his secret. Others have it also and Joral Jet is not aware that I know something about the mysteries of the land of the Hindoos."

"I thought you did, Fider. Now, I want to know how to counteract Joral's powers should he attempt to exercise them to-day or some other time."

The little hunchback took from his pocket which he carried beneath the blouse he wore, a little bag, the contents of which he poured out on the table.

He next went to a shelf on which his eyes espied some glasses, and taking one filled it with water which he took from a pitcher. He now dropped into the water some singular looking roots and powders all of which dissolved as soon as they touched the water, and when the fluid had become clear again, he drank off the whole and leaned back in his chair.

"Is that the secret of the old fellow's powers?" cried the Thumbless Hand bending forward and watching the immobile face with all eyes.

"Watch and see," was the answer.

The Thumbless Hand did so and presently with a deep sigh Fider seemed to pass into the stage of death. His muscles suddenly became rigid, his lips twitched and he was to all appearances as dead as a mummy.

The Thumbless Hand looked on and for a moment turned pale lest the man might not be shamming, but really dead. What if he were? What if the mysterious potion had taken life when such a thing was not intended?

For ten minutes the strange man lay back in the chair, but all at once his eyes rolled and to the watcher's astonishment he came out of the trance as bright as ever.

"You see how he does it," he said, looking at the Thumbless Hand. "This is Joral Jet's secret. He can drink so much and remain dead for hours. I know the old Hindoo! You will find him your match so long as you don't know the secret of his soul."

"But how to counteract this power—that's what I'm after, Fider. I want to know how I can break the old rascal's power when he attempts a game of this sort. You may know that when he finds himself in danger he suddenly becomes to all appearances dead."

"Yes, yes."

"But how can I break the spell?"

Fider drew from another pocket a little packet which he opened with glittering eyes.

"You can bring him back to life by suddenly holding this under his nostrils and squeezing it."

The Thumbless Hand took the object thrust toward him and held in his hand a little thing which resembled a fish's bladder which he could contract at will. It seemed to be filled with some light fluid, but while he squeezed it it appeared empty.

"This is the power which breaks Joral's," laughed the dark-faced one. "You will have to be quick and the old Hindoo will come out of the trance in a jiffy."

"A thousand thanks, Fider! You are worth your weight in gold. When do you go back?"

"To-morrow. I shall sail on the steamer

which will carry me back to the scenes of my boyhood days, and you shall never see again the man who left the land of story for the home of the American. I shall never return, but I shall think of you; I shall think of all my friends here."

The hunchback stood before the Thumbless Hand and looked at him while he held the bag in his grip.

"I can't pay you much, Fider. It is a little too early in the game, and, then, I don't know how the whole thing will pan out."

"Never mind. I have some money, enough to take me back and there I will be rich again. May you succeed, Theron! May you find yourself successful in all your undertakings."

The little man went out and when the door had closed on him the Thumbless Hand sprung up and laughed.

"Now, my old scoundrel, thanks to one of your own countrymen, I have that which breaks your power. Show your hand to-day at the major's house, and I will show you a trick which you are not thinking about. Fider whom I picked up in my rambles knows as much about the mysterious potions of India as you do and while you trust a good deal in your snakes, you don't forget those drugs which send you to sleep and enable you to counterfeit death itself."

Meantime the little man called Fider was on the street and at the same time a face which had been resting against the window that looked from the Thumbless Hand's room into the chamber that adjoined it moved, and two eyes looked full of triumph.

Those eyes belonged to the detective who had left Tina sleeping comfortably in his den. Ford Fox had discovered the home of the Thumbless Hand. His keen eyes had tracked this man to what he believed was his home, and having secured the next room, which he knew had an unused communication with the Thumbless Hand's abode, he had utilized it in such a manner as enabled him to hear and witness the interview between Fider and his friend.

When the Thumbless Hand, dressed with scrupulous care and ready for his visit to Major Rubio's where the two were to spring a mine of destruction on Joral Jet, had taken his departure, instead of following him, Ford Fox managed to effect an entrance to the other room and stood at last in the very place where he had lounged to stand.

In the den of the Thumbless Hand!

He began at once to search it thoroughly. He went from table to trunk and his keys opened the various locks which he confronted.

But it seemed to be a fruitless hunt, for when he came back to the door with nothing in his possession, for he had left the serpent alone in its cage, he looked back over the scene of his search and smiled.

All at once footsteps came to the door and he drew back and in an instant had hid himself behind a curtain which cut off one corner.

The door opened and some one came in.

Ford Fox did not move at first, but when he heard the person take a seat at the table he ventured to look into the room.

It was not the Thumbless Hand; no, he had not come back, but the person at whom he looked was a woman and he knew her at once for Hagar, the Dark.

"I'll leave a note for him," said she, and a minute later she left on the table a bit of paper covered with writing, and when the door had closed on her the detective stepped from his place of concealment and read what Hagar had written.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE END OF A LIFE.

"He is here at last. Your decoy is successful. Now, we shall have to meet this cunning devil with cunning."

"Never fear, major. I think I know how to meet him and you will let him in and make yourself agreeable till it is my time to appear on the scene."

Major Rubio and the Thumbless Hand were together in the splendid parlor of the former's house, and the man who stood on the steps outside, having just, muffled them, was well dressed, dark of face, and, in short, a different looking person from the one who sold serpents for a living or dealt in the deadly magic of the East.

The bell roused the servant, who ran to the door and admitted Joral Jet to the presence of the man whom he thought he had in his power. As he entered the parlor and got a good look at Major Rubio, he saluted almost to the floor, but immediately rose and came forward.

"I received your letter, sahib," said he, "and Joral is here to answer it in person."

Major Rubio, as calm as a new-born day, looked toward the room in which the Thumbless Hand had vanished and then glanced at the eager face of his visitor.

"I have sent for you to consult you in regard to a matter which may interest both of us," he began. "You remember, Joral, that when we were in India we once explored the old temple of Krishna and that in one of the mysterious chambers which are beneath the surface, we dis-

covered a strange little idol in black which seemed to have eyes that moved in its head."

Joral Jet grinned.

"The little god! I recollect him, major, and recall, too, how you suddenly dropped him when I told you that no profane hands were allowed to touch it."

"Yes," smiled Major Rubio. "I did drop the god, but now I don't believe I would do it, Joral."

"No, you are in America now, and here they don't believe in the gods of India."

"But what would you say, Joral, if I were to show you this same little god which, as your people say, uncovers all hypocrisy and even deprives their magicians of their strange powers?"

The old serpent-seller was not caring for this sort of talk. He had been lured to the house with the promise that he should see Edna, his promised bride, and here Major Rubio was telling him a lot of nonsense about the past.

"Wait!" said the major, "you shall see Edna the fair by and by, but just now you are going to listen to me. I have the little black god in this house and he can break the spell of your powers."

"You need not say that, for the gods of Krishna never leave the shores of India. You didn't carry the little one off that night, for we left the temple in a hurry and never returned."

The long fingers of Joral Jet wrapped themselves about one another and Major Rubio noticed how strangely glittered the eyes before him.

"You doubt me, I see. While I do not possess the little god myself he is in this house as you shall see."

"Where is he?" cried Joral, half derisively. "Show me the black deity which has such strange powers in the land of the Ganges."

Major Rubio threw a quick look toward the folding doors and as he waved his hand they parted and the Thumbless Hand came forward.

Joral Jet seemed to fall from the chair he occupied as the man of mystery advanced, his sinister eyes fastened upon him and his tread making no sound on the carpet.

Instinctively the serpent-seller looked down at one of the hands that hung at Theron's side and seemed to see that it had no thumb. He then caught the glance that was thrown at him from the cold eyes of Theron, but he never moved as he filled the chair.

"That's the holder of the black god," said the major. "Joral, old friend, he will talk to you now."

They had met before; yes, Joral had sold this man the serpents of death, but he had never met him in Major Rubio's house.

There was something terrifying in the aspect of the man who stood in the beautiful room looking at him, while the dread hand which had been described in the newspapers rested lightly at his side and seemed by its inaction to be more terrible still.

Theron came closer; he stood directly in front of Joral Jet, and then drew from his pocket something which he unwrapped and set on the table.

It was a fantastic-looking thing, something like the human form, though not more than ten inches high and as black as black ivory.

Joral's eyes seemed to bulge from his head the moment he set eyes on this object, and when he had looked at it awhile he turned toward Major Rubio and smiled.

"I told you so, Joral," said the major. "That is the little black god of India."

"You doubted, I see," said the Thumbless Hand. "You did not believe the little thing was in this country. You left it across the water when you left the land of the Thugs, and no doubt have feasted on the belief that it would never interfere with your powers. Listen to me, Joral. You have played out sooner than you expected the game you are at. You have trafficked in serpents long enough and now you are at the end of the cord."

Joral listened with a face tensely drawn and with his little hands clinched on his knees. "You have failed, I say. You have lost a wife and you—"

"It is false!" broke in the serpent-seller. "You can't cheat me out of the wife I have bargained for, and that man yonder dare not break his oath to me."

The serpent king had turned again to Major Rubio, but that individual was not talking and filled his chair with the rigidity of a statue in stone.

"You have lost a wife, I tell you," continued the Thumbless Hand. "You need not think that you can triumph with the little black god in the hands of your enemies. It breaks the spell of the magicians in your own land, and it will bring all your schemes to naught in this. You have simply counted without your host, Joral. You have no serpents with you and you are at our mercy."

At the mercy of the man who spoke meant something terrible. Joral seemed to realize this while he looked into the eyes before him, and when Theron moved again, taking from the table the idol which he seemed to crush in his Thumbless Hand, he leaned toward the old serpent-seller and went on:

"You shall know what it is to make a promise" said he. "You, Joral, will take an oath in this house and now."

"I swear to nothing!" cried Joral.

"Oh, you don't, eh? You swear to nothing and thus will get yourself into a peck of trouble."

There was no reply; the face of Joral Jet was growing white and the lips seemed to meet with resolution.

"I swear to nothing for you!" cried the serpent king. "This is not one of the real gods of Krishna's religion. It is a false one made to deceive."

"Say you so, you old villain! Look at this. I press the little one here and— Don't you see now?"

The head of the black idol had fallen back as if on hinges and where it had been was lifted a serpent's head which moved to and fro while the little eyes shone like diamonds.

"You don't doubt it now, do you, Joral?" cried the Thumbless Hand. "You must swear that you will not play out the hand you hold; you must promise that never again will you enter this house and never for a moment try to make Edna, the Beautiful, your wife. Then you will pledge us to quit this land at once; you will swear by all the gods of India to seal your lips as regards Major Rubio's past and finally you will give us the charm nearest your heart."

A gasp parted Joral's lips and a groan escaped them.

That was too much. It was asking him to part with his very existence; it was taking from under him the rock on which he built his mysterious powers.

"I won't!" cried he as he twisted madly in his chair. "Joral will never do all that!"

The Thumbless Hand, looking across the little space that separated them, merely smiled and set the god on the table.

"Then you never quit this house alive!" said he, coolly. "The hand of fate is against you, Joral. You have sold your last serpent and for the last time seen the sun. You will never go back to the land of temples. You will fill a grave unknown in the land of the white man, and Edna the Beautiful will become the wife of your foe."

"My foe?"

"The wife of your foe!"

Joral Jet looked at Major Rubio, who was watching him with victory in the depths of his eyes.

"This is your work!" he cried. "You have broken your promise to me. You have leagued yourself with this man whose hand has no thumb and you have promised to give him the fair Edna if he beats Joral of Bengal."

There was no reply though the look which the old serpent-seller obtained from the major told him that the shot had gone to the bull's-eye.

"Your triumph, great and final as it may be here, will fail in the end. I am still Joral, the Powerful, I care not what the little black god can do. I am still the man who carries in his bosom the secrets of your life. I know all about the escape of the man who died in the little room and how the red hand came to leave its impress on the wall. The owner of that hand fell back suddenly from the serpent that darted toward him and throwing up his hand he touched the wall while his heel robbed the little snake of its tail."

The Thumbless Hand was watching Joral with the intensity of an old fox.

"I know, too, whither that man went after the crime," continued the serpent-seller. "He brought back the snake, but it had no tail, for his heel ground it off while he fell against the wall, leaving there the marks of the thumbless hand. And now you take this very man for your ally, Major Rubio, as we call you here. You link your fortunes to him and promise him that the pledge made to Joral shall be broken and the child in the upper room given to him as his reward. Do you know who Edna is? Do you remember?"

"Stop that man's mouth!" suddenly thundered Major Rubio as the front door opened.

The Thumbless Hand sprang at Joral Jet and threw himself upon the old man before he could rise from the chair.

"It may be Edna coming back sooner than we expected," said the major, dashing across the room and the next moment he had thrown wide the door and was looking down the hall.

As to the Thumbless Hand, he forced Joral Jet back into the chair and with his hands buried in his throat, held him there immovable.

When the major came back to say, with ashen lips, that Edna had been lured into the parlor on the other side of the hall, Theron pointed at the serpent-seller.

Joral Jet lay back in the chair with the hue of sudden death in his face.

"The old trick," said the Thumbless Hand with a smile. "He went off into the trance which on more than one occasion has saved his life, but this time he fails."

He drew forth something that looked like a little bladder, and with it in his hand moved to-

ward Joral, when the hand of Major Rubio seized his arm.

"What have you got there?" he asked.

"The power that out-tricks this old viper—the best card in the deck."

"Are you going to restore him?"

"Yes. Why not? We haven't got through with him yet. I will bring him out of the trance and then we will finish the play."

"No! Let him be. He will come out of this trance himself, and then we will go on. But look! I never saw death so admirably counterfeited before, not even among the mystics of India."

The Thumbless Hand bent forward and stared at the face among the scarlet cushions of the fatal chair.

"My God! I believe he is dead!" he suddenly cried.

Major Rubio pushed the chair to the window and threw back the curtain.

"You are right. This man will bother us no more."

The Thumbless Hand held the bladder close to Joral's face, but there was no movement.

The dread hands had gone a little too far.

CHAPTER XXIII.

IN JORAL'S DEN.

"WHAT shall we do with him?"

Major Rubio said nothing for a full minute. He was looking into the face of the serpent king, and seemed to read there the triumph for which he had longed. At last he was out of that man's power; he was free from the spell of the weird man of the East, and the secret old Joral had held concerning his past would never be told to the world.

The words of Theron did not rouse him.

"We must do something with—the body," said the Thumbless Hand, with a swift glance toward the door. "If Edna is in the house, and you say she came in awhile ago, we must work fast, for she should not see this man dead in the chair."

Major Rubio sprang toward the folding-doors, and pulled them apart.

"Pick him up and come with me!" he cried.

Theron bent over Joral and lifted the body from the chair, then with his arms about it, he crossed the room with his burden and the doors closed.

As this happened Edna bounded into the parlor.

"They have gone, but they were here a moment ago!" cried the fair girl. "I heard them and recognized the voice of the man with the maimed hand. What was he doing back in this house?"

She went toward the doors, but something seemed to stop her there, for she went no further.

"They will come back, but they must not find me here when they return."

She glided from the parlor and ascended the staircase to her own room.

Meanwhile the Thumbless Hand with his burden had gone down a flight of steps leading apparently into the bowels of the earth and Major Rubio, with a lantern in his hand, was pointing at a corner near which were heaped a lot of brick.

"Put him there," said the major. "Double him up, if you can, and place him in the corner. We can do the rest," and he laughed as Theron laid his burden down and ran his hand beneath his shirt.

"Can't you find the charm?" asked Major Rubio with an anxious face.

"I have it at last!" exclaimed the Thumbless Hand, withdrawing the searching member as he looked up at the major.

He held in the light a little sack curiously made and seeming to contain something that rattled when he shook it.

"It is nothing much," sneered Major Rubio. "I thought it was something more elaborate than that."

"It is the most potent of all charms," said Theron, "for it has until now preserved the life of this strange man. But nothing can save from the hands I have," and the little sack was thrust into the speaker's pocket while he turned again to the body doubled up in the corner.

Major Rubio held the light while Theron walled old Joral up in the cellar. He looked on with intense satisfaction while the work progressed and when the Thumbless Hand threw down the trowel and looked at him the major smiled.

"That ends the secret and its keeper!" said he with a light laugh. "The snakes are now without the master."

"Will you search the house?"

"Of course."

"When?"

"This very day."

"And whatever you find there, you will destroy?"

"Yes."

"And the snakes themselves?"

"I will see that they harm no one after to-day."

"I think that best. We might as well blot from the page of history the serpents as well as their king. Let us go up now."

The light of the lantern was thrown over the freshly built wall, and the two men went back. In a short time they stood once more in the parlor and Major Rubio held out his hand to Theron.

"The promise will be faithfully kept," said he. "My life is pledged to the keeping of it and I will see that it is kept to the last letter."

In the hallway Theron paused and threw a hasty and longing look up the broad stairs.

Edna was somewhere overhead; the beautiful girl for whom he was playing was there, ignorant of what had taken place though she had told Major Rubio that she would be at home when Joral Jet came.

He passed out and hurried away.

"Now for the snakes and then the detective," he said. "This man is getting dangerous. As yet, he has not tracked me down, although he is capable of giving us trouble because he is persistent and all that. He is said never to quit a trail until he has reached the end of it, and there is where he is dangerous. I will go to the serpents first and then to the ferret."

Theron, the Thumbless Hand, threaded a number of streets before he dodged down the one which led to Joral Jet's abode. He had been there before and knew the way, and when he gained the door, with a key which he took from his pocket he let himself into the place and shortly stood in the serpent room.

He saw the cages on every side, the larger ones that held the boas and the others where the deadliest serpents writhed and hissed.

"Here is where the old mystic lived and plotted; there is where death started from many a dark trail. I see them all. What sharp eyes and shiny bodies they have. Ah! these are the little killers!"

He was standing near the glass-covered cages where the little snakes were and for some time he admired them while he dreaded their powers.

Suddenly he turned away and went to work. He began to search the den which he did systematically, looking everywhere in the course of his hunt and always with the sharpest of vision.

It was evident that he was looking for something which seemed to elude him.

In the end he seemed to find it. In the darkest corner of the place he came across a niche in the wall which he did not discover until he had moved one of the cages.

Running his hand into this niche, he touched a button which opened a door and the eager hand of Theron, the searcher, found a roll of paper which he pulled out.

It was dark and tied with a cord; it was, moreover, covered with dust which fell off in showers as he bore it to the light and gave it a sharp inspection.

"This must be it if he left anything of the kind," said he, in audible tones. "This must be what Major Rubio fears."

He drew old Joral's stool to the window which was curtained, but not enough to exclude all light, and with his knife he cut the cord of the packet. It opened and some papers were displayed to his gaze. They were covered with curiously-formed characters like Indian script, and after studying them a little while he retied the whole and said with a smile:

"Fider could read this for me, but Fider may be gone by this time. But I think I know of another who is learned enough to translate this stuff. He shall do it before I turn it over to Major Rubio, and perhaps I will hold it for a weapon."

A noise roused him, and he turned to see something writhing near the bottom of the cage containing the boas.

One of the huge snakes had broken the bars, and was half-way out!

"You want at me, do you?" cried the Thumbless Hand, as he went forward and looked at the monster. "You want to put an end to me for finishing your master? Well, you sha'n't have that pleasure."

He looked about him for a weapon, and his eye caught sight of a hatchet resting on a shelf. Seizing it, he turned toward the cage and then uttered a cry of horror.

With a supreme effort the serpent had succeeded in freeing himself from confinement, and was lying on the floor almost within reach of his arms.

He did not know how long it was, only it seemed the father of all boas as it raised its head and shot out the dreaded tongue, besides showing its coils in the light that came in at the little window.

Theron retreated to the wall at his back with the hatchet clutched in his hand.

As the serpent stretched itself on the floor, the Thumbless Hand raised the weapon and struck with all its might.

The sharp edge of the shining weapon sunk into the snake's flesh, the great body sprang up like an animal, and Theron, struck by the tail, was thrown back to the wall, stunned.

He sunk there unconscious, the papers falling from his hand, and the serpent twisting in every direction, for the hatchet had severed the vertebrae, though there was still power and death in the gigantic coils.

It was by a miracle that the Thumbless Hand escaped them; he came out of the swoon, but not until some minutes had passed, and for a little while he did not know where he was.

But by and by the scene in the den came to his mind and he saw near him the body of the boa, still at last. But he saw more than this, and a sight it was to send a nameless fear through his soul.

The cages lay in confusion on the floor, showing how the boa in the death-agony had knocked them from the benches, piling them up in dire confusion and breaking open some half a dozen.

Everywhere Theron saw glittering eyes and little bodies that ran hither and thither like sunbeams.

He believed at first that he had opened his eyes in a world of serpents and not in Joral's den.

He was held spellbound by the sight that greeted him; fear added to his terror, and for fully five minutes he did not move, but looked and shuddered.

Would not the slightest movement on his part rouse the deadly reptiles and bring them down upon him? Would they not attack him and finish him in the house of the dead master, leaving him to be found by the police with the documents left behind by Joral in his hands?

But he had to move some time: he could not remain there all the while and watch these serpents, some of which at any time might come to where he was and succeed where the boa had failed.

Theron, fully roused by the danger, rose at last and stepped toward the door.

It seemed to him that the whole den swarmed with serpents, that they lay everywhere, looking at the larger world to which the boa had consigned them.

All at once something darted at him and with a curse he set his heel upon the gleaming thing, crushing out its life in an instant and then spurning the headless trunk with his foot.

The Thumbless Hand reached the door and stopped there. He had forgotten the papers which lay over against the wall where he had fallen.

He could not leave the house without them; they were too precious to be left behind.

Watching his opportunity, Theron sprang after the papers; he seized them and started back; but at that moment something wrapped itself about his leg.

A thrill of horror froze his blood when he looked down to see a pair of beady eyes looking up at him while a forked tongue moved convulsively near his ankle.

The Thumbless Hand grated his teeth in the agony of the situation and made a sudden swoop at that very head.

The maimed hand caught the snake at the throat, it twisted off the head and threw it against the wall.

"Not another moment in this devil's den!" cried Theron. "I shall be killed by the reptiles if I remain."

Kicking the headless body from his limb, he plunged toward the door, threw it open and caught in his lungs with a cry the fresh air that greeted him.

"I don't think they can get out," he thought as he shut the portal behind him. "If the neighborhood knew this it would recoil with horror for there is death of all sorts in this house."

He was beyond the door now, and with it carefully shut and the documents in his bosom, he was flying from the house of terrors.

"I'm safe at last!" he exclaimed as he threw himself into a chair at home, "and there are the papers. But see what I brought home!"

Well might he stare with horror at the roll, for from it protruded the greenish head and beady eyes of one of Joral Jet's man-killers!

Theron fell from the chair with an exclamation of horror.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE TRAIL FOX AND HAGAR.

KNOWING that little Tina was safe with Susan, Ford Fox the detective had gone back to the trail.

Now that he had seen the Thumbless Hand and had even inspected his abode, he was almost ready to close in on the man who, as he believed, had left his mark on the wall of Number 99's den.

Hiram Harkness, the escaped convict, was strangely mixed up with the lives of both Major Rubio and Hagar, the Dark, besides being the enemy of the man who had taken his life. What he wanted to discover was the true motive for that crime, and why Theron the Thumbless Hand had stolen in upon Number 99 and given the detectives and police another puzzle in red.

It was the night following the events we have just witnessed at Major Rubio's and in Joral's den of serpents, that a man looking little like the keen trailer entered a room where he was greeted by a young man who reclined on a couch.

"I have missed you, it seems a week to me, though it has in reality been but a few hours," said this person. "I am getting stronger all the time and something tells me that I shall get well."

"You are mending; there's no doubt of that," was the reply, and Ford took a seat at the bed and looked at the face which Winton White, the dreamer, showed him in the light of his lamp.

"The snake is dead," continued the young man.

"Dead, you say?"

"Yes, go and look."

The detective crossed the room and bent over the cage with the glass top.

A little object was lying on the bottom of the cage and after looking at it a moment, he turned to White with a smile.

"You are right, boy; the snake is dead."

"There is something curious about it. I saw it die. I saw the man kill it."

"Not that serpent. Why, no one killed it in this room!" cried the shadower.

"Wait till I tell you how it was. I was lying wide awake, but in one of my peculiar trances, when I saw a man standing over yonder. I can't say how he came into the room, but he was there and I had a good look at him. But all at once the whole room seemed to change and instead of being the old place, it was old Joral's den. I saw the cages and the serpents against the sides of them. Suddenly this man whom I have seen before in my dreams, because he has no thumb on his right hand, advanced and seemed to take something from a niche in one corner of the room. He was carrying it off when something seemed to happen, and he was strangling a snake which he seemed to have taken from a cage. I saw it all and when he threw the snake to the floor, he vanished. Curious to know what had happened to the little one in the cage yonder, for it had been so lively before, I rose and went over to it, but it was lying stretched out on the floor of the box, dead. I thought this very strange, but when I looked again I saw that the head had been partially torn from the body, as you can see. Such was the vision which came to me, Ford. What it means I cannot tell you, but all these strange dreams have a meaning. They don't come to me for nothing. They have a bearing on some one's life. Can it be on Joral's?"

Ford Fox sat silent a moment while Winton passed his hand over his face and watched him.

"Don't you believe that my dream represented what was taking place at old Joral's den?" he suddenly asked. "I can't think otherwise, yet I saw nothing of the old man himself."

The detective started.

"I will look and report," he cried. "I will go and see what is going on there."

Winton White saw him depart; he heard his footsteps as they went away, and falling back he closed his eyes and murmured a prayer for the safety of the woman he loved.

Ford Fox reached old Joral's den and stopped at the door.

Behind him were the lighted streets of New York and at his hand the knob which he had only to turn to enter the house of secrets and death.

After listening awhile, he turned the knob and the door opened. He looked inside and saw that all was dark.

Shutting the portal behind him as he went forward, he struck a match along the wall and held the flame above his head.

"Heavens!" he cried, almost dropping the light as he staggered back, his cheeks suddenly rendered white and his eyes bulging from his head.

"The cages are in confusion and the snakes have escaped!"

It was true.

Here and there, suddenly roused by the noise and dazed by the light, were to be seen the deadly companions of the old serpent-seller.

The whole floor seemed to be littered with death, and Ford Fox sprang back just in time, for a snake had darted at his leg and had missed it by a hair.

He stood for a minute outside the door to take another look into the old room, but the terror that filled his soul, cool-headed as he was, daunted him.

Where was Joral Jet?

The detective did not open the door again, but turned away and stood for a little while where he knew he was safe from the fangs of the serpents.

Footsteps startled him and he drew back among the shadows which fortunately fell against the door.

A figure came down the alley; it approached the old house and Ford saw that it was a woman's.

She stopped and rapped at Joral's door, watching all the time by the detective.

It was Hagar, as he could see by her shawl and then by the face of which he at last got a glimpse.

Hagar, the Dark, at Joral's house.

The woman grew uneasy when she found that her knocks were not answered; she muttered something which the ferret did not catch and then seized the knob.

To open that door as Ford knew was to set at liberty the pent-up poison of the natives of the Bengal jungles.

He saw the gloved hand that grasped the knob, but before Hagar could accomplish her purpose, he darted forward and his hand closed at her wrist. Speaking not, but with a start, she turned upon him and looked him in the face. They were standing in the narrow court in front of the house of mystery and the detective was eying Hagar with a look which was more than that of idle curiosity.

"You are always on the watch!" cried Hagar, drawing back. "You are still determined to enmesh me."

"Why you, if I hunt only the hand that slew the old convict in the tenement?" asked the ferret.

"Never mind. There are some questions I will not answer."

Ford looked at the door and then smiled as he asked her:

"Were you seeking the death which old Joral sells?"

"I was seeking the man himself—not his serpents. Let me go to him."

"You must not pass that door."

"Why not?"

"There is death on the other side of that portal."

"There always has been."

"But it is death uncontrollable, now."

"What do you mean?"

"The serpents are at large."

"Out of their cages?"

"Yes."

Hagar looked at the door a moment and then laughed:

"A pretty play of yours, I suppose. You liberated them."

"I did not. I opened the door awhile ago, and by the light of a match saw the very floor of the old trap littered with Joral's pets. It was enough to freeze my blood with horror. Do you care to see them, Hagar?"

"I would like to look into that room, but if all is true that you tell me, I care not to cross the threshold."

"It is true."

"And Joral? Where is he?"

"Not in that room, as I could see," was the reply. "I couldn't see him at all, but the snakes are loose."

Hagar seemed to reflect for a full minute; she gazed at the detective and then turned to the door again.

"I won't look," she said at last, drawing back. "I will let the serpents hold high carnival in there."

He did not release his hold.

"What, are you going to hold me prisoner?" she exclaimed.

"You will go with me, Hagar."

"With you? Why, you are my enemy. You are the bloodhound on the trail."

"Not on your trail. I am the clue-hunter, but you are not the guilty one."

They went down the alley together, the detective closely watching the hands of the creature at his side. That they were hands capable of motions as quick as the claws of a cat he well knew, for he had seen one of them strike at his heart with the black-handled dagger, and now that he was taking her back from Joral's den, he had a right to watch those same hands which she had told him were as deadly as the old man's serpents.

Hagar, silent as the sphinx, walked along, now and then looking up into his face and making a close study of it.

What had come over her? Had he cowed this cool woman who had sworn vengeance on him for taking the trail of the Thumbless Hand, and was she to give him another link in the chain?

It was a long walk to his abode, but Hagar, offering no resistance, went up the stairs with him, and with a sigh dropped into one of the chairs.

"You have brought me to your home?" she said with a peculiar smile to which he replied kindly:

"Yes, Hagar, but still you are not a prisoner."

Hagar, the Dark, fell to watching him as she wound her fingers about each other and now and then looked up with a sudden flash in her eyes.

"What do you want me to tell you?"

It was a singular question and the detective did not know for a second how to take it.

"I don't want you to implicate a friend, whatever you may choose to say," he said. "You are not a prisoner, Hagar."

"That is strange. You are Ford Fox, the detective, and I told you once that I would give you the dagger some time."

"You may tell, if you please, whose hand was left in red on the wall of Hiram Harkness's room?"

She started violently and her hands stopped moving.

"I thought so!" she cried with a smile. "I thought you would want to know this."

"You don't want to tell me, Hagar? Very well, I will find it out by and by. I think I know now. You and your brother also know—"

"My brother?" she cried, with a look that startled him. "My brother?"

"Woman, you and Major Rubio are brother and sister. You have his eyes and chin, and he has, in turn, your hand, small and soft."

"Fiend! Nothing escapes you; work day and night, don't you?"

"We work a good deal," answered the detective.

"And they say you never fail. I believe it. My brother? I won't deny that."

She stood erect and looked down at the detective and for a moment seemed on the eve of throwing herself upon him in his chair.

"It was left on the wall, was it?" she said. "I read in the papers that the impression of a hand was found on the wall of Hiram Harkness's room. It was said to be a thumbless hand—a good clue for you ferrets of the trail. Why haven't you turned aside long enough to find out something about the life of Number 99 while he lay in hiding all this time?"

"Maybe I do know something about it," smiled the detective. "Hagar, you can supply a missing link if you will."

She did not ask him what, but looked and seemed to study his up-turned face.

"What became of Hiram Harkness's child—the babe that was stolen from its nurse about the time of its father's escape from Sing Sing?"

Hagar, the Dark, recoiled and answered in a flash of fury:

"That is a secret which shall die with me! It is one you can not solve, fox of the trail."

CHAPTER XXV.

EDNA AND HAGAR.

"It is one I cannot solve, do you say?" cried the detective. "We will see, Hagar. There is nothing about this trail which can be kept in the dark. All will be made clear and the mystery that surrounds the convict's child will come to light with the rest."

"Do you think she still lives?" curiously said Hagar, the Dark, as she seemed to lean toward the ferret in her eagerness to catch every syllable of his answer.

Ford looked at her and smiled faintly.

"All will be made clear, woman, no matter how you seal your lips now."

Hagar glanced toward the door and said nothing.

"You can go," said the detective. "Remember, you are not a prisoner."

She crossed the room and stopped at the portal, looking back at him as he sat at the table as unconcerned as if he had not tried to get from her a mystery and had failed.

"We shall meet again!" exclaimed Hagar.

"You are bound to stick to this trail—"

"To the end, Hagar!" he interrupted.

That was all; the interview ended and Hagar threw wide the door and stepped out.

Ford heard her footsteps on the stairs and then, going to a window, caught sight of her on the street.

"She's a queer one," he muttered. "She carries the secret and will not surrender it, but I will wrest it from her one of these days."

Will you, Ford Fox? Do you realize that by preventing Hagar the Dark from entering the old Indian's den where the masterless serpents writhed and hissed, you have placed on your trail an enemy as desperate as any you ever had there?

Hagar looked back and for half a minute seemed to watch the place she had just left. Her white face contrasted strangely with the glare of the lights of New York, and when she started off again her hands were shut at her side and she was saying something to herself.

"I will see who gets the secret from Hagar!" she cried. "Yes, I will see that I am not hoodwinked by this keen man who is on the trail. I care not for the Thumbless Hand, for he is not our friend; I care not how he has aided us. But this man—this fellow whom I found at old Joral's door—he is the dangerous one, and, as such, should feel the heavy hand of the oath-bound."

Hagar vanished. She turned up soon afterward in another quarter of the city and at the door of Major Rubio's house.

It was a long time since she had stood face to face with this man underneath his own roof, and when she entered she went direct to the library and opened the door.

The next moment she fell back, for in the arm-chair at the table sat not Major Rubio, but Edna.

The beautiful girl was writing, and hearing the door open she looked up and encountered Hagar's gaze.

"I beg pardon," said the visitor, halting on the threshold and looking at the surprised creature as she turned to her and seemed to wonder from whence she had come. "I thought I would find your father here and had no idea of disturbing you, miss."

Edna said nothing. She was still looking at Hagar as if she divined that something connected with her own life had brought her to the house at that hour.

"He may come in at any time," she said at length. "He won't be out much longer, I'm quite sure."

Hagar went forward and took a chair near the table, but Edna did not go back to her writing.

"You don't come often?" she said, looking at Hagar whose face showed traces of her interview with the detective.

"No. I have never been here before."

"Ah, but you were here last summer. Don't you recollect? It was early in the evening and the interview you had with papa in this very room was rather stormy."

What a memory Edna had. Hagar smiled and replied that she had forgotten the visit, but that the interview was not as stormy as Edna intimated.

There was little color in the welled lips of the girl while she listened to Hagar's explanation and when she had finished she seemed to draw nearer.

"Now that we are alone—the first time we have ever been fairly face to face—I want to talk to you," she said. "Papa is not here and that is so much the better. You are called Hagar. I feel that you are the woman whom papa visits sometimes."

"I?"

"You are the same woman. They call you Hagar and you have a strange influence over papa."

Hagar did not know what to say. Perhaps she wished she had not entered that house, but it was too late now; she was there and in the presence of the inquisitive Edna.

"I believe that you have known him a long time," continued the girl. "I believe that some tie unites you. But the other day I found in papa's desk, while looking for a pen, a photograph inscribed 'Hagar.' It resembles you, and on the same card was a certain date which corresponds with the time when papa was abroad. Do you care to see it?"

"The photograph, girl?"

"Yes—the card and the date on the back of it."

"Is it here?"

"No, it is up in his private room, but I will get it for you to look at."

Edna rose and left the room watched by the woman who remained there.

When she came back holding in her hand a photograph, Hagar's gaze became riveted on the card, and when it was handed her she started and then glanced at the fair girl.

"You think I resemble this, do you?" she smiled.

"I thought so the moment I saw it in the desk. You were younger when it was taken."

"But I don't see the date you mentioned."

Edna took the card and looked, then seemed to start while she shook her head.

"It has vanished! I see that it has been rubbed out since I saw the card in the desk. It is very strange, isn't it? Some one has rubbed out the date. I'm quite sure papa didn't do it, for he has left the picture lying in the desk for years."

"But it is not there, as you can see."

"That is true. Some hand has rubbed out the date and I can't explain it."

Hagar seemed to be smiling. Underneath her dark, lustrous eyes a sinister smile seemed to lurk as if she was gratified to discover that the date had been obliterated from the photograph.

"Who do you think I am?" she suddenly asked looking at Edna in her singular manner.

"To me you are very much of a mystery," was the quick reply. "I only know that I believe you have known papa a long time and that you, in a manner, influence his career. I don't like the visitors he has."

"He has visitors, then?"

"He has two."

"Gentlemen?"

"No, men!" said Edna with a flashing of her eyes. "In the first place, he has had here a man who must be one of the darkest villains in the world. They call him Joral, and he sells serpents."

"Sells snakes, you say, child?"

"Yes, Joral is an East Indian and he comes to see papa as if he had a right to nearly everything in this house. Then, papa has for another friend a man whom he calls Theron."

This time Hagar started visibly and the hand she was resting on the arm of the chair fell off.

"I like neither one of these men," continued Edna. "They were here last night."

"At the same time?"

"Yes, but they—papa and Theron, I mean—took good care that I should not see them together. When I came home I was admitted and sent into the parlor on the other side of the hall, but I heard voices which I knew came from the lips of Joral and Theron. I listened with all ears, but the sounds ceased suddenly, and I thought the pair came together in a scuffle."

"Theron and Joral?"

"Yes. At any rate, when I entered the library it was empty, and from that hour I have not seen the old serpent-seller."

Hagar made no reply. If all this was in the nature of a revelation, it did not elicit any words of astonishment. She looked at Edna and for a

full minute seemed to study the fair white face near the table.

"Will you go with me?" suddenly asked Edna. "Will you accompany me to the cellar? I believe that you are papa's friend and that you will befriend me."

"But what is in the cellar for us to see?"

"That is what I want to find out. I believe that Theron the Thumbless Handed carried something down the steps and I have not had the courage to go down alone and see."

"Do you think it was old Joral, child?"

"I can't tell you," smiled Edna. "If you will go with me we will see."

Hagar's eyes seemed to get a new and eager light. She had heard from the detective's lips that the serpents were loose and had believed that, if at large, they had lost their master.

"I will go with you, Edna," she said to the girl. "We will see how true your fears are."

Edna led the way from the room and, followed by Hagar, passed to the rear of the house where with her own hands she lifted the door in the floor, revealing a flight of steps.

"This is the way," she remarked, turning to Hagar, the Dark. "This is the way to the cellars and we will soon see if anything awaits us down there."

Carrying the light which threw its gleams over Hagar's dark face, Edna descended the steps and at last turned upon her companion in the middle of the large cellar.

"I see nothing yet," said Hagar.

"Wait! We have not investigated," was the reply. "This way, please."

Edna went over to a corner and held the light above her head.

"See! Here are some bricks which have been here a long time, but the heap is not as large as it was."

The light fell upon the fresh wall in one corner of the cellar, and the two women thus strangely thrown together, looked at what was a brick wall in which the mortar was hardly dry.

Hagar glanced at Edna and saw that she was staring at this wall as if she was thinking fast.

"This wall was not here a week ago," said the girl. "I was down here looking for a bottle of wine for Daniel, the servant, while papa was out, and I am quite certain that no wall was in this corner."

Hagar said nothing.

"If they mastered Joral Jet and brought him to this place he is yonder!" and the hand of Edna pointed at the wall.

"But why would they do that?"

"Rivalry!" cried Edna. "You don't know what is happening in this house. You have never heard of the secret, the keeping of which is so important to papa. Joral Jet, the old schemer, was working to his own interests and he was to have become my husband—"

"My God, child! Not your husband?"

"It is true! He was to have become my husband. My soul and my happiness was to have been the price for the keeping of that secret which must be a dreadful one; but another came between and the Thumbless Hand, of which you may have heard, offered to break the spell of that Indian's power, and for what?"

Hagar was silent.

"For me!" laughed Edna. "Theron offered to break the spell of Joral's power for the very prize which he was after—my own self! He received the promise he wanted. Papa turned from Joral Jet even after taking the oath he demanded, and gave me to this man with the maimed hand."

"And so you think that they met last night and that the hand without a thumb killed the old wretch in the library?"

"What means that walled-up corner if something of that kind did not happen?" cried Edna. "What mean traces of fresh mortar at our feet if no one worked on this spot last night?"

"Well, what would you do? Would you release the man behind that wall? Remember! he must have been your enemy—he would have blighted your life by your own confession and—"

"But I would know!" broke in the girl. "I would know what is behind that wall. We can break it down in a short time; it is nothing but brick, and tools are at our hands."

But Hagar drew back.

"Don't touch it, girl. Let that be a secret with yourself, believing that your father deemed it right and just that the enemy of his life should be his guest forever."

Edna listened to Hagar and then set down the light. In a moment she had vanished to another part of the cellar and all at once made her appearance to Hagar in her hands firmly gripped a pick-axe which she raised near the wall.

"No!" cried Hagar, her dark hand suddenly grasping Edna's wrist. "You shall not disturb the man who may be beyond that wall. Come! we will go up. Ah! some one is in the house. I heard a door. Girl, Major Rubio must not know that we have been here."

Edna recoiled, dropped the pick-axe to the ground, and the next minute Hagar was leading her up the steps to the rooms overhead.

"The woman's touch seemed to 'spell' the girl, and the eyes of Hagar, the Dark, fascinated her like those of a serpent."

CHAPTER XXVI.

JORAL SPEAKS THOUGH DEAD.

Theron of the Thumbless Hand, armed with the document which he found in Joral's den the night he nearly lost his life among the serpents, was very anxious to have its contents translated, as he was not conversant with the language in which it was written.

His thoughts turned to Fider, the man who had given him the antidote to Joral's powders, and hoping that he had not left the country, as he had said he was about to do, he sought out the house where Fider lived.

To his joy he found the little man sitting at his table munching a loaf, and when he crossed the room and sat down, Fider looked at him and grinned as if he more than half guessed his mission.

Theron went to business at once.

Drawing forth the roll of papers from which the head of the green snake had protruded to be killed after he had recovered from his fright, he laid it before Fider and asked him to read it and translate it to him.

That Fider was an Indian of the same district from which the cunning Joral had come was evident from several points, and Theron seemed to be acquainted with this fact.

Fider looked for some time at the first page of the roll and then slowly elevated his eyes to his visitor.

"You do not know what this is, do you?" he asked.

"I don't, but I want to."

"You can't read it?"

"If I could I wouldn't be here seeking you to read it for me."

Fider went back to the paper and ran his hand over the odd-looking characters.

"It's a strange life history," said he without looking up.

"I thought as much."

"The narrative begins in my own country and, from what I can see already, crosses the water."

"Very well. Don't you intend to read it for me?"

Fider began at once, reading slowly and after the manner of the Indian, while Theron, leaning over the table, watched him like a hawk. He read with care, making the translation as he proceeded, and for some time nothing was heard in that room but the drawling tones of Fider, the Bengalee.

The Thumbless Hand said nothing. He only watched the dark face of Fider and seemed to see there increasing eagerness and curiosity.

"Do you know whom this might mean?" suddenly asked Fider as he came to the end of a long sentence.

"Never mind that!" cried Theron. "Go on!"

It was the story of two lives which Fider read with such startling fidelity. It was a strange story of dark deeds, of an escape from India after the profanation of a temple, and of the hunt for the profaner by those whose duty it was to see that all such people are finally punished, no matter how many years elapse, nor how far they get from the scene of their crimes.

It told how the man who was to hunt down the main infidel had turned from his path to become that man's friend; how he reached the shores of the New World and ingratiated himself in the profaner's good graces, keeping in his bosom the secret of his dark work in India. Years had passed since the deeds mentioned in the old manuscript; they had made the criminal rich and respected; they had brought him money and position, but still he had been watched by the avenger of the temples, had been under the ban all this time.

"What's that?" cried Theron, reaching out his hand when Fider had finished a sentence. "What's that about the man who escaped from Sing Sing twenty years ago? I don't see what he has to do with the theft of the diamonds from the Indian temple."

"We must read on," answered Fider. "It is the strangest story I ever heard of."

"Did you ever hear of the profanation of that particular temple?"

"Who has not heard of it?" cried Fider, with a smirk. "Any one can hear the story in Bengal. It was said that an American did the work, that it was his hand that pulled the diamonds from the rings of the goddess. I have heard that a thousand times on the wharves of India and in the jungles the story has been told."

"An American, eh? Good. I like that. They are ready for anything. I wonder if he has had the courage since to repeat the deed? But, never mind. What has the old jail-bird to do with that theft?"

"We will go on," meekly said Fider.

He proceeded, but the hand of Theron stopped him again.

"One moment, Fider. How long have you lived in New York?"

"Five-and-twenty years."

"And never met Joral Jet?"

"I never went to the old man's den. I was afraid of him and his snakes."

"Ah, I see. You knew him, though—knew him in India, I suppose."

"I know him in Bengal," was the answer.

"What, was he there? Was he always a serpent-seller?"

"Sometimes he was a juggler and mountebank."

"But a man of courage and dark deeds?"

"He wasn't a very good Hindoo."

"I thought as much. Well, what brought him to this country, Fider?"

The little man shook his head.

"You don't know, eh? Well, we will go to the end of the story before you. Go ahead and let me have all of it."

Once more the translator proceeded, and was not interrupted again to the close of the narrative.

"It's a strange story," cried Fider, as he looked up and encountered Theron's gaze.

"Very strange, but not entirely mysterious to me now. Joral Jet wrote it while he was not attending to the needs of his infernal serpents. That is the story of a part which he played in the crime of the temple robbery. He may not have killed the two old men who guarded the idols, but he knows who did."

"He knows!" muttered Fider, his eyes falling to the paper again.

"He holds that secret. He knows where lived the man who did that deed. In other words, Fider, he was going to hold this confession of his over the head of this person. Joral Jet will never do that now."

"Because you have it in your hands?"

"Partly so and because he will never tell anything."

Fider did not seem to catch the full meaning of these words.

"The man who escaped from Sing Sing had a child at the time of his trial. Do you know that, Fider?" asked Theron.

"I have heard so."

"Do you know that not very long ago the papers said that this man who has been missing so long was found dead in his hiding-place?"

"The man who escaped from prison?"

"Yes, yes!"

"I recollect."

"Now, Fider, if I were to tell you that I could lay my hand on the man mentioned so often in that strange story penned by Joral Jet—that I also know what became of the missing babe stolen the very night of the prisoner's escape, what would you say?"

There was no reply. Fider fell back in his chair and turned his face to the man sitting opposite him.

"I know it all. I know who stole the diamonds from the idol's hands; I know what fetched Joral Jet across the sea, and I can, within an hour, point out to you the child of the convict. I know all this and more, too, Fider, old boy. I am called Theron, but I am some one else. I am the Man with the Thumbless Hand!" and the speaker placed on the edge of the table where it could be seen the gloved hand which had no thumb.

"I am more than Theron," he went on. "I know all about the missing man who puzzled the detectives and police so long and at last died, as he should have died, in the den to which he crept, and in which he lived all these years with no one but the secret keeper in possession of his secret. Fider, you shall not quit the country now. The ship shall sail without you."

"But, master, I want to go back to the cities of India."

"You shall not go—not yet. I have not done with you, Fider. There is a fortune for both of us—a fortune worth winning in the New World. Did you ever see the diamonds that shone in the eyes of the goddess?"

"More than once on the *fete* days in Bengal I have been dazzled by their glare."

The hand of Theron dropped to his pocket and he drew from the depths of it a something which looked like a little roll of oiled silk and proceeded to unwrap it in Fider's presence.

All at once something fell out on the table and the dark face of the little man pounced toward it like a hawk. His eyes fairly glittered and his hand darted at the shining object, but all at once he drew back as if afraid to touch it.

"It won't bite like one of Joral's snakes," laughed Theron, watching him still. "It is but a diamond. I want to know if you ever saw any thing like it."

"I have, but not in this land."

"Not here, eh? Where then, Fider?"

"In the sacred presence of the goddess whose rings the American plundered."

"Oh, in your own mystic land. Yes, yes. Your memory is very good, Fider, boy. You are now looking at one of the jewels that glittered for centuries on the hand of the goddess. Look at it sharp, Fider. It has the eyes of an old friend, hasn't it, and perhaps, after this night, you will never see it again."

"It is one of the stones. There were no others that had this peculiar light."

"You are right, Fider."

"Where did you get it?"

"Now, that's a pretty bold question! I didn't obtain it in India, that's certain. Haven't I just intimated that I can lay my hand on the man who robbed the temple?"

"Yes—"

"And that I know where the diamonds are, for he never touched one of them to sell it in all these years? He dared not. This thief still holds the gems and I know him well."

"It wasn't the man who escaped from prison?"

"No, but he had a secret which, in time, if he had not stepped from this stage of action, would have given the diamond thief a good deal of trouble. Do you know, Fider, that in his room after he was dead was found a paper which told who stole the diamonds from the rings of the goddess and that he was about to give his story to the world?"

"Wonderful!" cried Fider. "And the person whom he was going to betray hastened his exit from the world?"

"Wouldn't that be natural?" was the reply.

"Why shouldn't the diamond thief want the convict out of the way, if he knew the secret which had been kept so long?"

"But how did he, a prison bird, know all this?"

"Ah, Fider, the ways of some men are past finding out. They pick up secrets accidentally and this man did so. He one day went to visit a certain man in this city and found him out. Although no one suspected that Hiram Harkness was a common thief, he had in his blood the taint of crime. He, finding himself in the home of the man whom he visited, and all alone, searched the most private parts of the house and found the diamonds. Strange to say, he took none, though sorely tempted, and when he left the place he wondered whence came those singular gems. He had counted them and there were seventy-two—just the number stolen from the goddess, eh, Fider?"

"Seventy-two, sabib."

"Well, with this secret in his bosom, Hiram Harkness went to the other crime—to the one which sent him to Sing Sing. But before he went up the river, he had read in an old account of the robbery of the temple, a description of the stones taken and all about the man suspected. He was cunning and keen-witted. He went back to the seventy-two jewels in his mind; he knew that the man in whose house he had seen them had been abroad, and putting this and that together, Hiram Harkness obtained possession of a secret which was priceless. But he never made use of it, only to write out the story of his suspicions which, as I have said, was found in his room after death."

Fider made no reply, but looked across the table into the eyes of Theron, the Thumbless Hand.

"Now, I almost know who killed Hiram Harkness," he ventured.

"You do, Fider?"

"Yes."

"Well, who did it?"

"The man whose secret he held—the thief of the jewels!"

Theron fell back and laughed.

"You would make a good detective!" he cried.

"I believe you ought to remain in this country and become a tracker of men. You would outwit the tigers of your own country; but, Fider, you might make a mistake now and then."

"I don't know," grinned the little man. "I might make a good many mistakes."

"Did you read the accounts of the death of the escaped convict?"

"I only heard about it."

"You did not read the particulars, then?"

"No."

Theron looked at Fider a minute without speaking.

"Well," he went on, "you might be mistaken. Fider, I guess you won't sail on the vessel. I want you. You are keen and cool. I like the shape of your hands. I have use for you, Fider. There is something about you that reminds me of what I have read about the tigers of India. They are deadly, eh? Well, we will be like them—you and I, ha, ha! I want you to help me. I have a foe who is to be outwitted—an enemy who is getting dangerous. Afterward, Fider, we will roll in wealth; but this man first."

"Who is he?" asked the little man.

"One of the shadows—they call him Ford Fox, the ferret."

"Do you want him trapped?"

"Trapped! That's it exactly, Fider. The trailer must feel this or something just as deadly!" and the thumbless hand struck the table.

CHAPTER XXVII.

OLD BUT TO BE FEARED.

WHILE Theron and Fider faced one another in the den tenanted by the bunchback, a figure that crept from shadow to shadow through the streets nearest the river, made its way for nearly a mile across the city.

It drew near to the house formerly occupied by Mother Clutch and Little Tina and mounting the creaky stairs, at last opened the door of the deserted abode and glided inside.

"Home at last! Back from the beak of the raven and the claws of the Tigers!" said the thin-faced creature as she drew herself forward and sunk exhausted upon the couch whereon the strange couple—Mother Clutch and her *protegee*—were wont to repose. "I am glad I'm back with some life left in my body. Where is the little one? Where is Tina?"

She looked wildly around the room, but saw no one. Her own reflection in the cracked mirror on the wall was enough to drive every vestige of color from her cheeks and she turned away with a shudder.

Mother Clutch had come home.

The old woman who had been decoyed off by a false letter was home once more, exhausted and the shadow of her former self, and now she looked for Tina in vain.

"I wonder if he came for the child?" said she. "Did he carry out his threat and decoy Tina into the web? Where is she anyhow and did Ford ever look for us?"

As there was no one to answer her, Mother Clutch subsided at last and began to search the room for a possible clue to the child's whereabouts; but she was not rewarded.

It's no use. I must go out and find the detective. I must take the story of my adventures to the ferret and he will try to bring the guilty to justice."

At this juncture she happened to glance from the window and saw a dim light in the one across the space that separated the two houses.

"Heavens! some one is in the old den again!" cried Mother Clutch, as she landed at the window and cautiously drew the curtains aside.

Sure enough some one was in the room in which she and Ford Fox had looked down into the dead face of Number 99.

She could not help seeing a shadow on the wall as its maker, still unseen, moved hither and thither, and for a moment she wondered if she could not perform the feat she had seen Ford perform when he swung his body over the space and clung to the sill to look into the room and discover the crime. But she was too weak for the effort and contented herself with looking at the window and seeing in the room that light which mystified her so.

What did it mean? Was it possible that the Thumbless Hand had come back to the scene of its crime? If so what had brought it back after so long a time?

Mother Clutch, half frightened by the light in the den and by the shadows on the wall, stood there a long time, or until she saw the light extinguished.

It went out so suddenly that she started as if the door had opened to admit the Thumbless Hand.

"All is dark there now," she said. "Has he gone out upon the street, and would I get a glimpse of him if I went down to the sidewalk?"

She thought this worth trying and slipping her shoes she crept into the hall and then down the steps.

On the lower floor she stopped and listened with the front door ajar. She dared not go out and look up or down the sidewalk for the shadow of the slayer enveloped her and seemed to chill her blood.

Suddenly a shadow fell across the sidewalk at the door where she stood and Mother Clutch drew back.

It came nearer and to her horror, the door was pushed open and she was imprisoned between it and the wall. Her first impulse was to rush into the street the moment she was released by the person mounting the steps, but she stood there looking at the figure on the stairs, and when it moved she felt that she would sink to the floor.

It was the figure of a woman and Mother Clutch, believing that the person had come down from Number 99's den, hugged the wall and watched her till she disappeared.

"She is going up to my room?" She is trying to find something. I must see what she does."

She crept up the steps after the apparition, glided along the wall where the stairs did not creak so much, and at last stood near her own door which she knew had opened for the unknown.

That person was in her room—in it at the dead of night, and when she thought of this her old hands suddenly clinched and she felt her blood run hot for a second through her veins.

In truth, the tigress leaped through Mother Clutch's blood and she went toward the door like a bolt of lightning.

Before she could check herself she had thrown the portal wide and stood again in her little den. The person already there turned.

They stood face to face, these two women, one handsome and with the agile body of a leopardess, the other old, but not without some powers.

"Who are you?" demanded Mother Clutch.

"That's a pretty question," said the other with a smile.

"Who are you, I say? Speak, or I will tear you to pieces."

"Not yet. I am here because I have a right to search this old trap."

"You have? Who are you?"

The next moment the hand of the strange creature fell upon Mother Clutch's shoulder and seemed to sink into her flesh.

"Sit down," she said. "Sit down and I will tell you something."

Mother Clutch obeyed.

Then, standing near her, the woman who was dressed in a close-fitting habit of black, continued:

"I am Hagar. I can tell you this without

breaking any vow. You are Mother Clutch. You are the creature who took charge of a babe twenty years ago—the child of a convict."

"Do you know that?"

"I do."

"Well, what if I did take charge of a child then? I lost her, ha, ha!"

"You are sure of that, are you, Mother Clutch?"

"She was stolen from me."

"By whom?"

"That may be your secret," grinned the old woman.

Hagar said nothing for a moment, but her eyes did not turn from Mother Clutch.

"I want the child's clothes. I want the locket which you kept back."

"You do? Then, you must know what became of the little one."

"Let me have them and I will let you alone. I will give you full room in this den and won't bother you any more."

"You can't have them. They are all I have to remember the little one by, and if she is now a young lady, she won't want to see those relics of her babyhood when her father was a jailbird."

Hagar, the Dark, seemed to look at Mother Clutch with the blazing eyes of a wild beast.

Stepping suddenly to the door, she locked it and turned upon the old woman.

"They are in this room," she went on. "You have kept them all these years, and here, for you have lived nowhere else. Where are they, Mother Clutch?"

The old hands suddenly tightened as if on an imaginary weapon, and seeing this, Hagar bent nearer and hissed:

"I am a desperate creature! You don't know me. You have been away, and I happen to come to this hole the very moment of your return. You look as though you had escaped from some cell."

"I have escaped from the dungeon of death and by a miracle. I don't know what became of the little one, I have been gone so long. I can't tell you whether the ferret who is my friend tried to find my trail, but I am sure that if he tried he had a hard time of it, for the man who decoyed me knew what he was doing, and played his hand with the cunning of a fox."

"Come! I don't want to hear such stuff as this. I want the locket and the little garments."

Mother Clutch, seeing that the door was locked and that Hagar had placed the key in her pocket, made no reply for a moment.

"What will you do with them when you've got them?" she asked.

"Never mind that. I want them now."

The old woman rose, and would have crossed the room to the darkest corner when the hand of Hagar clutched her arm.

"I will go wherever you go," Hagar cried.

"You shall play no hand against me, Mother Clutch."

Mother Clutch was disappointed, as one could see by the look she gave Hagar.

"You were going to play a trick on me, weren't you?" asked the tigress woman. "You thought I would stand over there until you could reach the bureau and snatch out a pistol or a knife. I have seen women like you before to-night, and I don't intend to be baffled by such. I will take the treasures."

"Then come with me."

Still clutching her arm, Hagar was dragged across the floor and Mother Clutch opened the lower drawer of the bureau.

"They're gone!" she cried, as she looked into Hagar's face.

"It is false."

"Look for yourself, then."

Hagar looked down into the drawer for a moment, and saw nothing there that seemed to reward her.

"I have been robbed. Some one has been here while I was gone. It must have been the Thumbless Hand."

"The Thumbless Hand?" repeated Hagar.

"Yes. Do you know him?"

A smile was all Mother Clutch received for reply and the face of Hagar, the Dark, turned once more to the drawer.

"Were they in the drawer?"

"Yes."

"Did you think them safe there?"

"Who would rob me? Who suspected that I long ago took the child to raise—the babe whose father went to prison, to escape and afterward to be murdered in the house over there?"

"Mother Clutch, you have been very foolish. You might have known that your secret was shared by some one. Didn't you ever dream that the child was living?"

"Really, I don't know what I've dreamed. Only once I thought I saw her face at a window, but it was in a quarter where the rich live, and she was a young lady. But it couldn't have been her, though the face at the window remained with me a long time. What became of the babe, Hagar?"

Hagar recoiled and the hand of Mother Clutch, as swift as a thought, flew at her and pushed her into a chair.

"I am master now!" laughed the old hag. "I

have turned the tables on you, my tigress. You are not as strong as I thought you were, but I am desperate. You have the secret. You know what became of Pearl—of little Pearl, the jailbird's child. Where is she? Tell me, or by the heaven above us! I will sink my fingers into your throat and tear it open."

Already, white-faced and gasping, the woman in the chair with the sharp knees of Mother Clutch on her bosom, was trying to tear loose the hands that had the grip of a steel vise.

"You can't break away from me. You can't get loose. I have the death call on you, my beauty. I have the hands of a fiend and they will leave you here with the rats!"

This was true. The old woman knew no mercy. She sunk her fingers deeper into the throat beneath them, and all at once bent down and laughed in Hagar's face.

"Where is she? Will you tell me if I loosen my hold?"

Hagar made a sign and the iron grip relaxed.

"You must show me, besides telling me," continued Mother Clutch. "I will go with you and if you deceive me I will kill you on the spot."

Hagar was free at last, but such a choking as she had received she did not want repeated. It was like falling into the hands of a demon.

And when Mother Clutch drew back, she laughed as if at last she was to hear from the stolen babe—the child of Hiram Harkness, the incendiary.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WHAT A DEATH-TRAP CAUGHT.

"HE hasn't come yet and he may be too sharp for us. I don't like the job, for I never played a hand like this and I—"

"He will come. The hour is not yet here and when the door below opens you may look out."

"Then you are going to leave me alone?"

"For a moment, Fider."

Theron, the Thumbless Handed, stood at the door of a singular looking apartment and glanced at Fider, the man who had translated him the strange documents found in old Joral's den.

"All you have to do is to touch the button in the wall the moment you hear a man on the stairs. You have it at your hand, you see."

"Yes."

"The moment the steps fall and seem to stop, you will press the button twice and then quit the house."

"I understand that, but he may not come, or if he comes, he may—"

"There is no escape if he once climbs the stairs."

"I am trusting this to you, Theron, my friend."

Fider was alone; the wind that came in gusts from over the Bay just visible from the window of the room where he stood, shook the sash and drowned the striking of the clock which struck the hour of ten.

Theron went out, leaving his ally there to touch the button when the prey had entered the trap.

Fider went to the window and stood there for some time.

He was waiting to hear the door below swing open and announce that the quarry—Ford Fox, the detective—was in the trap.

But he heard nothing.

"Confound it all, why don't he come?" he exclaimed. "I can't remain here all night waiting for the sharp who may have smelled the game and proved too wary for us. I wish he would come, or stay away, for I want to get out of this."

By and by Fider the hunchback slipped into the hallway and leaned over the staircase.

Even as he looked he started.

There was something dark midway on the flight. It was crouched on a step with its back against the wall and seemed to be watching for some one.

"I wonder how long he has been crouched there?" exclaimed Fider, as he crept back and shut the door behind him. "Here, he has been in the trap for some time and I was none the wiser. That's a pretty trick."

Fider looked at the button and reached out to touch it, but suddenly, believing that he should make sure of the game, he stole back to the corridor outside and once more looked down the steps. It was still there.

"He hasn't seen me," grinned the Bengalese. "I have it all my own way. He must be waiting for me to come out, but I will give him a surprise."

Fider pressed the button with a sharp movement and there came to his ear the sound of falling steps. It seemed that the whole staircase had opened and fallen into the cellar far below.

Holding his breath a moment, Fider pressed the button twice without stopping and heard the steps swing back again. The trap had worked well; it had simply let the man down, to his death while he, Fider, could go down those same stairs and walk into the street beyond without fear of danger.

He went to the door and back into the hall

again, looked down the steps, but this time saw nothing.

"He has vanished!" chuckled Fider. "I have put the detective out of the way by a very clever play. Ford Fox is off the trail at last and Theron need fear him no longer. I would like to take a look at him. Of course the full killed him instantly. He is lying dead in the water in the old hole and they will never look for him there. It was well done, and no brain but Theron's would have thought of such a trap."

Fider crept down the steps and at last landed on the floor at their foot.

"Shall I?" he said. "There is a little trap in the floor and a bit of burning paper will show me where the body is."

He opened a door at his right and entered another room.

In one corner of this apartment he stooped and lifted a small door in the floor.

All was still beneath the room, so Fider drew a match from his pocket and finding a bit of paper there, ignited it, and when it was ablaze, dropped it into the opening while he shaded his face with both hands and watched it fall.

"He's there!" cried the man. "He fell on his face in the water. I see him plainly and he will stay there till Gabriel blows his trumpet. It was a good play, and Theron, my friend, is at last rid of the tracker who tracked with the keenness of the tigers of India. No more trails for this man; no more hunts for the doers of evil, for that was his life mission, and that's why, perhaps, he was looking after Theron. Ah, they can't beat the man with the thumbless hand; they perish on the trail that leads to my friend!"

Fider closed the opening and stole from the house. He passed out into the street with no one watching him, and in a little while had vanished.

Half an hour later he appeared to Theron in latter's room.

"You are back early, Fider. He didn't keep you waiting very long?" said the Thumbless Hand.

"Not very, Theron. He came soon after you left and I had it all my own way."

"Good for you, Fider! You are worth your weight in diamonds like the ones taken from the hands of the idol. We will have them all ourselves before long."

"Those very ones, Theron?"

"Yes, the whole seventy-two. But this man? Are you sure you got him, Fider?"

"Why not? He was on the stairs when I touched the button and I know that he lit in the water and on his face."

"Good again! It was a dead fall, eh, my boy?"

"He broke his neck."

The hands of the man called Theron met, and for a moment were clasped.

"You'll want something after this, Fider. Go and help yourself," and he tossed a bill upon the table.

With the money in his fingers, Fider went out to quench his thirst while Theron sat still and smiled.

"At last! Out of the way; off the scent forever! Brushed aside and dead! This is the fate of the dogs who follow Theron. This is the end of the cool heads whose business it is to hunt down their fellow-men. Thank you, Fider. When I am the husband of Edna, I will shower you with wealth, for then I can afford it and you can go back to India richer than ever."

He rose and went out, feeling on his cheeks the wind and seeing scores of dark figures that brushed him as they passed.

"Fider seemed very sure of the catch," he said, aloud. "He seemed positive, said the ferret was on the steps when he touched the silver button, and even told me that he lit on his face in the water. How could he say this without knowing it to be true? Did Fider go to the little trap and look?"

Theron went to the house where the trap had been set for Ford Fox, the ferret.

He let himself into the hall and opened the door on the right.

In another moment he had lifted the trap in the floor, and was watching the descent of a light, the same as Fider had done. It revealed the whole interior of the place as it went down.

"I see a body in the water," he muttered. "It is lying on its face, just as Fider told me. It must be so. The trap caught the fox this time. He is out of the way!"

He shut the door and went back. In the hall he stumbled over something that had escaped Fider's keen eyes and picked it up.

It was a bottle, and placing it to his nose, he detected the smell of spirits.

"Did the ferret have this on his person?" he asked himself. "If so, he was not the cool-headed man I have taken him to be. A detective with a bottle should not be feared by any one. Why didn't you find this, Fider?"

Just thirty minutes later Theron entered a room and looked into the face of Major Rubio.

"I'm glad you've come," said the major. "I want to consult you about this man who is even now on the trail."

A smile illumined the face of the Thumbless Hand.

"There is no man on the trail," said he.

"You must not deceive yourself. You told me last night that this detective who has a reputation for clearing up all the mysteries he tackles, was at work."

"But last night is not this hour."

What did he mean?

Major Rubio looked at him, and tried to make out the true meaning of his words.

"I speak in riddles, do I, major? Then, let me come out boldly. I can say, looking into your eyes, that there is no man on the trail. It is cleared at last."

"And everything is safe? Theron, you deserve well of your old friend."

The Thumbless Hand watched the white, even rejoicing, face of Major Rubio, and then felt the hand which he thrust forward.

The secret was safe—safe at last; the ferret was out of the way, and Joral Jet was immured in a tomb from which all the tricks of the mystics could not extricate him.

"Where is she?" asked Theron.

"Asleep. Do you want to see her, Theron?"

"Not now. Let her sleep."

"She is not asleep!" rung out a voice at which both men started, and the door, opening at that moment, admitted the beautiful figure of Edna.

Standing in the light, she looked pale, but none the less lovely.

"I am not asleep!" she went on, halting near the two startled men and fixing her eyes on Theron. "I am here. I am the creature whom you have won by this last play which was more than darkly hinted at just now. I am the so-called child of that man yonder, and, with the death of the man-hunter, the secret is safe."

"Who told you this, child?" cried Major Rubio. "I have said that our friend here is to be your husband, and you said you preferred him to Joral, the old wretch who would have wrecked my life as well as yours."

"I said so because I loathed the old villain's business. How many people has he killed by those serpents whose fangs leave no mark and whose poison is not detected? I am to become this man's wife, am I?"

She had advanced another step and was looking at Major Rubio who regarded her from the depths of his chair.

"He has saved us both."

Edna laughed.

"And who is he?"

Major Rubio burst into a laugh.

"She wants your pedigree," he cried, looking at Theron.

The Thumbless Hand smiled and gazed up into the face of the lovely girl.

"Who am I?" he said. Your future husband, girl."

"My lord and master, ha? My husband, made so by crime which stains the hand which has no thumb? You my master? When you have washed your soul of the red hue of murder—when you have shrived yourself and can come to me with the proof of innocence! When you can do this, then we will talk about the altar. When you hold up that hand—hold it up in my presence and before Heaven say that it never took human life, that it never throttled anyone—not even a wretch like Joral Jet—nor left a hunted jail-bird dead in his nest—then you may come to me with the bans!"

Her figure seemed to increase in stature, she looked like a goddess in the lamplight, and both Theron and Major Rubio remained silent until she turned and had reached the door.

"Gods! where did she get that spirit?" cried Major Rubio, as Edna passed out.

"From her father. It doesn't surprise me one whit, but I didn't expect to see her show it here."

"Hot blood, hot blood! Wait! It will cool down," laughed Rubio.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MOTHER CLUTCH'S STORY.

PERHAPS if Fider, the cunning, who had sprung the trap on the man on the stairs in the old house, had gone down into that dark cellar and turned the body lying in the pool of stagnant water, he might have fallen back with a cry of astonishment.

Yes, if he had descended into the place instead of trusting to the revelations of a bit of lighted paper, he would have turned from the scene with a cry, for the body half hidden in the pool was not that of the city sharp.

The trap had caught a victim, but not Ford Fox.

The man seen on the stairs by the eager Fider was not the keen-witted prince of the trail, nor was the bottle which Theron found in the hall a piece of his property.

The detective had not come to the trap so well set for him, but another had entered it and had paid for his folly.

But, as we have seen, Fider did not think of going down into the pit nor did the Thumbless Hand venture into the same place, for the light which he dropped into it told him all he sought, and he had turned from the house to seek out Major Rubio and have the startling interview

with Edna with which we closed the preceding chapter.

That same night Ford Fox was surprised to see his door open and the wild and haggard face of Mother Clutch appear to him like an apparition.

The old hag's return was so unexpected after the sudden ending of the trail he had followed to the river's edge, that the man of clues looked twice before he felt sure that he was gazing at a living being.

"I'm back! Back again and from the regions of death and terror," said the old woman as she came forward and with a half frightened look dropped into the chair that presented itself. "You haven't been looking for me to turn up thus, For?"

"I have not. I tried to track you, but the trail ended at the river and, as water leaves no marks, I was obliged to turn back without you."

Mother Clutch smiled.

"It leaves no trace, that's a fact," she said. "I have been to the water and have looked upon the river with a grip of steel at my wrist. I thought I was gone for good, for I was foolish enough to answer the letter signed 'Theron,' and when I found out that I was in the eagle's talons, I felt that all was over and that I should never again behold you. But where is the little one? Where is Tina?"

Ford, the ferret, sent a ray of sunlight into Mother Clutch's heart by assuring her that Tina was safe and then he asked the old woman to detail her adventures and escape.

"The reason why I fell into the trap was my eagerness to discover certain things," she began. "I once knew a Theron who, if living, could tell me a great deal and the first thought when I opened the decoy note was of him, and not of the Thumbless Hand. In fact, I forgot the double cunning of this old Satan, and fell into the trap. I left Tina asleep and stole from the den, going down street with my face as much concealed as possible. If I was followed at the time I was not aware of the fact, but I must have had some one at my heels. I reached the house named in the note and even then did not dream of a snare. I thought only of the Theron of other days, for he was the only person I ever heard of who bore that name, and in another moment I had passed the Rubicon."

"I heard the door of that old house which is near the river close behind me and then, quick as a flash, I seemed to see that I had been caught. And caught by the Thumbless Hand at that! I stood for a little in a dark hall and would have rushed back into the street if I had not found the door locked when I turned to open it. Presently some one entered the hall at the furthest end of it and said: 'This way, Mother Clutch. I am here.' I went forward, for the voice sounded like the voice of the old Theron, and when I had reached the door my hand was clutched and in an instant I was in that man's power."

"In the power of the Thumbless Hand?"

"Yes. He conducted me into a room which was almost bare of furniture and thence to a door which he opened in the wall. I saw a flight of steps and shrunk back with a cry of horror, but the grip grew more vise-like and there was no escape. I was shoved down those steps in the dark and stood in a cell-like place where I could not see my hand before my face. It was like a dungeon. But all the time I could feel that hand at my wrist and now and then hear the half-suppressed laugh of a devil at my ear. I was led across this place to another wall where the disengaged hand of my captor opened a door and I felt the wind of the river on my face. It was like going down into the cold waters of death and for the first time I pleaded for life."

"As well might I have talked to stone," continued Mother Clutch. "His laugh grew bitterer, and he suddenly struck a match and holding it near my face, showed his blazing eyes and cool looks which still further frightened me. We did not stir for a few moments and he suddenly led me back from the brink of the river and thrust me into a chamber, revealed by a door which he opened by touching an iron button in the wall above his head."

"The one I missed!" said the detective.

"What, were you that near me?" cried Mother Clutch. "Is it possible that you had trailed me so well as to be so near?"

"I was in the corridor that leads to the river. I saw the waves and stood for a little while looking across them at the lights of the boats."

"In the last dungeon I stood alone, shut in, with the cool Satan moving off as I could hear for a moment beyond the door. My doom now seemed certain. What could render it surer than the new cell and the hard walls that yielded not, and which, so far as I could see with my fingers for eyes, had no outlet at all? I might have fallen down in despair, but for the thought of little Tina and yourself, Captain Ford. I wanted vengeance. I wanted to pay back the man who had lured me to the spot and all because I had seen the red clue on the wall of Number 99's den. This was what caused him to set and spring the trap. This was the ruling motive of that wretch who even now believes that the rats have feasted on Mother Clutch and

that she will never tell what she knows, nor give you another clue to the Thumbless Hand.

"For some time I stood against the wet walls of that underground place with despair struggling at my heart, and my hands as cold as the touch of the dead. But all at once I was animated by a fierce desire to get out of the trap. I wanted to live long enough to help bring to naught the schemes of this cool-head, to baffle him and to tell him in the death-agony that Mother Clutch cannot be held by the traps he sets. I heard the rats as they ran in and out their holes at the foot of the wall. I listened to them as they gathered for the human feast which he had set them, and they even came to my feet and tried to begin their carnival of death. I fought them off, kicking them in every direction in the darkness and at last trampled a score to death on the hard floor.

"This victory gave me hope. I felt the walls with hands eager to tear it down. I pulled at the stones whenever I could get a purchase on them and at last felt one yield. It was like the opening of the gate of paradise to me. I believed that I was to rescue myself and, with the rats returning to the battle, I tugged at the wall, pulled out half a dozen stones and then set to work.

"I worked then as I have never worked before. I burrowed into the damp earth, working hour after hour until, exhausted, I fell down and slept. To waken was to go back to the terrible task and to toil on until I felt that I was far from the dungeon. When I stopped I listened and heard voices, but I dared not make my presence known. I knew not where I might be, nor beneath whose den I had stopped. It was another hour of suspense and when I resumed work I fell into a cellar and nearly frightened out of her wits a young girl who came down to draw wine. When she fled I followed and reached the street to fall exhausted in an alley where I lay at the mercy of the hunter if such a person was on my track. But fortunately I was not captured, and going back to my old den in hopes of finding little Tina, I came face to face with the woman who calls herself Hagar."

"You have seen her, then?"

"I had my fingers at her throat a spell, but she got away, else I might have killed her. That woman knows what became of Pearl, the convict's child."

"Do you think so, Mother Clutch?"

"I know she does. She refused to tell me what became of Pearl, but she wanted the locket and the baby clothes which someone had stolen from me during my absence."

With a smile that illuminated his face good-naturedly, the detective opened a drawer at his left and took out a roll which he opened on the table.

Mother Clutch recognized it with a cry.

"So you are the thief!" she cried. "So you are the one who went to my den and robbed me?"

"I am the robber," replied Ford. "I am the person who plundered the house during your absence. But what think you Hagar was doing in Number 99's chamber?"

"I cannot tell you. She came down and then entered my house, of course not knowing that I had come home. She found me on the watch, and we had it face to face there."

"Mother Clutch, the trail is nearing its end," said the detective. "I feel that I am near the end of the skein, but much has to be done yet."

"The clue is no longer on the wall, Captain Ford."

"How know you that?"

"I could see from my window. The red hand which Tina saw imprinted on the wall of Number 99's den is gone."

Ford looked incredulous.

"You may go and see for yourself," continued Mother Clutch. "I was surprised to see that it had vanished, but it is gone. I know not how it vanished. I only know what I have seen."

"Now, Mother Clutch, you can go to Tina."

"To little Tina? to the child who will be a handsome woman some day?" cried the old woman, clasping her hands. "I will go and fold her to my bosom."

The old creature left the house and the detective, turning back after he had seen her with her protegee, made his way to a certain house, the third story of which he gained and struck a light in a little room of which he was the sole tenant.

It was the scene of the crime from whose threshold he had stepped to the trail of the Thumbless Hand.

In this place, shut in by its four walls, Number 99 had lived during his hiding from the hand of justice. Here he had dwelt with the blood-hounds of the trail after him, and with his portrait in all the newspapers in hopes of leading the iron hand of the sleepless tracker to him. Here he had lived and died—died by a hand which had sought him out for a cool purpose. On his floor had been found the tail of the serpent, and his wall had revealed the mark on the Thumbless Hand—the clue in red.

Ford Fox turned at once to the spot where he had seen the mark of murder. He held the

light close to the wall and leaned forward in his eagerness.

Mother Clutch was right.

It was gone.

Scarcely believing the evidence of sight, the ferret held the match closer than ever and looked with all eyes. He had not mistaken the spot for he knew it too well.

But there was no hand on the wall; he looked again and even touched the spot, but all to no purpose.

Falling back, with the match still illuminating the little place, the city sharp looked around the room. It was as he had left it; the scant furniture remained, and the bedstead whereon Number 99 had often thrown himself after watching the child and the old woman in the adjoining house, stood where he had seen it last.

But now something lay on the floor at the head of the couch.

It was a glove, and as the ferret picked it up he smiled as if he had discovered another link.

"This is something. It was not here when I last visited the spot," said he. "It was not dropped by Hagar, for it is not a woman's glove. It was worn by the man with the maimed hand, for I see that the thumb has not been filled."

And thrusting the "find" into his pocket, Ford Fox threw the match to the floor and turned back to the trail of the crimson mystery.

CHAPTER XXX.

BACK FROM THE DEAD.

MAJOR RUBIO was more than startled by Edna's display of spirit.

He saw the fair girl sweep from the room with her last words ringing in his ears and when he told Theron, of the Thumbless Hand that it was an exhibition of hot blood, which would cool down by and by, he did not more than half believe it.

Edna the Beautiful was not the creature to think as the major thought.

Once in her little chamber near the head of the steps, she stood statue-like there and shut her hands till the nails wounded the white palms.

"Marry that blood-stained wretch?" she exclaimed. "Never! After all, he is little better than Joral, the old serpent-seller. He may not deal in snakes, but his hands are red all the same, and the thumbless member has become notorious."

She heard Theron quit the house, but the major did not knock at her door for an interview. Edna was glad of this, for she needed rest after the excitement of the night, and soon the house was quiet as though all beneath its roof were asleep.

But there was one person besides the fair girl who was not asleep.

This was Major Rubio, the man who had seen Theron depart with a renewed promise that Edna should soon be linked to him for life, and that her own career be blighted at the very door of hope.

He was alone and the hour of midnight crept on while he sat in the library thinking of the scene which he had just witnessed and now and then passing his hand over his brow in a gesture of thoughtfulness.

Midnight came and found him still there.

All at once Major Rubio started and listened, half rising from the chair and with his face as white as the wall behind him.

Some one was in the hall outside.

He had heard footsteps which had a strange sound and which seemed to have stopped at the door leading to the library.

Was it Edna? Had the girl in the snare of fate come down from her room unable to sleep, to upbraid him for what he had done in bartering away her womanhood to a wretch like the Thumbless Hand?

Major Rubio was about to cross the room and investigate the sound when the door opened, apparently without human agency.

It opened without the slight squeak it always had, and the next moment the major sunk back in the chair with a gasp.

He was confronted by a form which sent every drop of blood back through his heart with an icy wave.

He was confronted by the ghost of Joral Jet!

At the door with his deep-set eyes fastened upon him, stood the specter of the old serpent-seller, the man whom he and Theron had walled up in the corner beneath that very room.

Major Rubio groaned.

He attempted to greet the apparition with a grin, but it was a signal failure.

Slowly the thing advanced, and when it dropped into the chair which Theron had lately vacated, he cried out:

"My God! it's alive."

Alive? Yes, the eyes that danced in the dark head, the little orbs which had looked so long at the changing hues of the serpents, the little killers and the big boas, were alive.

Joral Jet, whose throat the Thumbless Hand had held, was back again, and the tricks of the mystics had been successfully worked despite Fider's preventive and Theron's grip.

For some time the two men looked at one another, and although Major Rubio tried to speak, the words died on his tongue, and he only stared blankly at the serpent-seller.

"I have come back," said Joral, resting one hand on the table so that the major could see the little ring which shone on one of the skeleton's fingers. "I thought I would come up and see how you were getting along after the game you two played on me."

"The game?" echoed Major Rubio.

"The trap which you and Theron set for old Joral," was the response. "It was clever and well-played, but it failed. Where is the beauty? Where is the future wife of Joral?"

Fearful lest the old man's tones should reach the fair one in the room overhead, Major Rubio threw out his hand in a gesture of silence; but the serpent-seller did not heed.

"Where is she? I have a right to ask after my future wife. I want to see her."

"But the child is asleep," said the major.

"It would not do to rouse her now."

"Perhaps not. I won't insist, major. But how do you like my return?"

Why ask that question? The man's look was answer before it was put.

"He has a hand that has the power of a vise," continued Joral Jet. "It is almost as deadly as the stings of my little killers. I wonder how they came on since I left them. But I won't go back any more. I am going to remain here."

"In this house?" cried Major Rubio.

"With you, old friend," grinned the old man. "Why not? I need not go back to the snakes just now. They live a long time without food, and no one will bother them, for all are afraid of their fangs. Where shall I lodge, sahib? What room shall become the home of Joral while he remains under this roof?"

Was ever coolness carried to such an extent? Who could beat this man for cleverness and resolution?

"You don't mean, Joral, that you intend to live under the same roof that shelters Edna, the frightened one?"

"She belong to me! She is mine!"

The eyes of the speaker waxed furious! They fairly glared at the man in the chair opposite.

"Show me my room unless you want to talk!" he went on.

Major Rubio sat silent, and watched the man who had come back from the dead by a trick of his. He felt horror stealing through his veins, and his hands seemed ready to jerk open the drawer at his left, and shoot dead the fiend in dark.

"Shall it be the little room on the left, at the head of the stairs, sahib? It used to look pretty, but that was when I slept there soon after you bought the house with the gold you brought from India. I leave it all to you, but think not that I am going away. Not until I have Edna for my bride!"

"Come, then," cried Major Rubio. "But, for Heaven's sake, make no noise beyond this room. You might disturb her."

"I will see her when she comes down to breakfast," smiled Joral. "I shall talk with Edna then."

There was no reply; the major led his enemy up the carpeted staircase and glared at him like a tiger, yet lifted no hand against the man of mysticism and secrets.

"The secret is safe while you carry out the bargain," said Joral, turning suddenly on the major at the door of a room. "When you break that vow it is lost. You can't kill Joral. I have control over life and death."

"By heavens! I believe it."

"The Thumbless Hand had the clutch of a steel vise, but I have the embrace of my boas. I can sting like the little killers. I am Joral, the old man of the Bengal shades."

"I might have known this."

"You did know it, sahib. Where are the precious stones? Where are the seventy-two diamonds which the goddess lost long ago? Will you let me look at them?"

Major Rubio seemed to recoil with a shudder, his eyes riveted upon the cool head at his elbow and for a moment he was ready to fly.

"Yes, I will look at them. I haven't seen them for years and I would like to look upon them once more."

"I can't—"

"You must, sahib. They are here, in this house; they are almost within reach of my hands. Show them to Joral!"

Biting his lips almost through, Major Rubio turned and led Joral to another door. He entered a chamber which contained, among other things, a couch with a curtain.

He shut the door carefully behind him as if afraid that the light passing from the room might alarm Edna.

All the time Joral watched him like a hawk; the dark eyes danced and the silk hands of the old serpent-seller opened and shut spasmodically.

"Where are the seventy-two riches of the goddess?" chuckled Joral.

Major Rubio went to a desk set against the wall and Joral saw that it was made of iron.

The major opened this desk and bent over it a moment, the old Indian leaning forward also

and looking over his shoulder into the depths of the place.

Still Major Rubio hesitated.

"They are there. Bring them forth, sahib!"

The rich man's hand pounced upon something in one corner of the desk and then he turned to Joral.

"They are there yet—the eyes of the goddess! You have kept them a long time, sahib, and the trailers of the temples have never found you.

There was no reply, only the packet nearly fell from the major's grasp, and the start which he gave was caught by Joral.

In another moment the package was opened in Major Rubio's hand and the dark face of the old Hindoo bent over it.

He seemed to dote on the gems that glittered beneath his eyes and his hand ventured up and he touched them.

"It took nerve and coolness, but you had it, sahib," said he. "It took a heart of steel and a hand of silk, but you had both. They are all here, sahib?"

"All."

"They shall be Elna's dowry, shall they not?" grinned the serpent-seller.

"I will decide as to that."

Joral, drawing off, snowed his teeth and pointed to the desk. "Put them back. Whether they become her dowry or not, Joral is rich enough to make her a princess here, or in the home of the Hindoos. We will go."

The desk was shut and locked and the feet of the Indian crossed the threshold of the treasure-room.

"I will be down to breakfast," said Joral, at the door of the room to which Major Rubio conducted him. "Tell Elna that I will see her there, if she rises before I do. I have no serpents with me, but, major, sahib, if you set another trap, remember! I have this hand and a tongue that can tell some strange things."

The door shut on the figure of the skeleton in the house; it seemed to inclose the fear of something which blanched the cheeks of Major Rubio, and when he turned away he looked at that door as if he would have sprung against it and, dashing it in, sink his fingers into the throat of the old wretch, his guest.

Down stairs he went and into the library.

"He is safe for several hours," he cried. "The dead has come to life. Joral Jet is the evil card in the deck. He is the shadow of this house, the keeper of a secret which, if known, will hurl us all to swift destruction. He shall feel this time the power which kills despite his vaunted strength. This night yet we shall get rid of the man we walled in. The ferret is out of the way, but this serpent has come back."

He slipped from the house and soon found himself on the street. He glided off stopping for no one and looking on every side until he reached a quarter of the city where he seemed to know the house that stood in the shadows.

He opened a door there and was lost to view.

Five minutes later Major Rubio stood face to face with a woman who had come down at his bidding with her face white and her eyes filled with eagerness.

It was Hagar.

"Give me the vial!" he said, holding out his hand. "Give me the vial I used in India."

"What would you do with it?"

"Wait and see! I have never asked for it until now. It kills beyond resurrection. I want it and it shall be back in your hands by daylight."

Hagar, the Dark, turned slowly away and vanished, and Major Rubio waited for her with a gleam of triumph in his eyes.

CHAPTER XXXI.

MAGIC AND FATE.

HAGAR came back to Major Rubio with something clutched in her hand.

"This is it, and remember that it is more precious than gold."

"I know," said Major Rubio as he took the little vial and held it for a moment between him and the light. "I know that is all there is on these shores, and that, once gone, we can never get another supply."

"The emergency must be very great."

"It is," smiled the man. "It is greater than you dream, woman! The crisis has come."

Hagar did not speak, but watched him as he hid the vial beneath his coat and then after a hurried farewell, he passed from the house leaving her to wonder what had brought him after the deadly poison which killed with unerring certainty.

Not satisfied, she crept out after him and tracked him home. She saw him enter the house and then, creeping to the rear, effected an entrance herself, and stopped in the hallway while she listened for sounds of the man with whom she had parted.

Major Rubio, his eyes on fire, now crept back to the door where he had left his accursed guest. He glided to the very portal beyond which slept Joral Jet and balted there while he listened at the keyhole.

Not a sound came from beyond that spot.

Armed as he had been armed but once before in his life—the time he had entered the Temple in India and stolen the priceless gems from the hands of the goddess, Major Rubio seemed to have been transformed into another person.

Joral was sleeping just beyond the door where he listened. He imagined the smile that rested on the dark face of the old wretch, and fancied that he could see him stretch his arms as if welcoming to them the fair girl on the other floor.

Major Rubio unlocked the door and stood in the serpents' master's chamber.

The shadow at the other end of the hall—Hagar, holding her breath—saw him vanish, and when the door closed, but was not shut tight, she dashed forward and stopped there.

What did she see?

She noticed the couch beyond the door; she saw the figure stretched there and the man who bent over that form with a hand half lifted like one about to strike.

This was the tableau that greeted the sight of Hagar at the door. She saw it with a distinctness she never forgot.

Joral Jet in that house? Now she knew what Major Rubio wanted with that deadly poison. Now she realized what he meant when he said the crisis had come. Indeed, it had; their fate hung in the balance and while Joral Jet lived they would not be safe.

She saw Major Rubio uncork the vial.

With compressed lips, he bent over the face on the pillows and looked down upon it without mercy.

"Three drops on the lips will be enough, but he knows that," she muttered. "All the mystic powers of that old secret-keeper can't resist the action of that poison. Ah! he is going to drop it."

The vial was poised above Joral's face; the hand of Major Rubio shook not, and was as steady as a youth's.

Hagar smiled while she watched the yellowish fluid run toward the mouth of the vial.

Seconds seemed hours and the liquor seemed as thick as molasses.

All at once the hand of Major Rubio stopped and the vial was not tipped another degree. It seemed poured in mid-air and the face of the poisoner looked as white as death.

"The old man is working his powers now," gasped Hagar. "He cannot use his hand and the poison will not run any longer!"

Yes, Hagar saw this from her station at the door. She saw that the major seemed fascinated by the little eyes which were wide open and which had spelled him with that singular power so well understood by the mystics of the East.

Charmed with the death vial in his grip! Held at bay by a power which he could not resist! It was terrible.

Hagar seized the door, but did not dash it open. Something held her back and she continued to look at Major Rubio, wondering in her apparent helplessness what would happen next.

Slowly the hand of Joral came up and neared the vial in the major's grasp. That hand was not drawn back to prevent the old serpent-seller from taking the vial. It could not move for the eyes on the pillow.

"He will be robbed of the poison and that by the secret-keeper," passed through Hagar's mind. "Joral, the mysterious, will rob my brother and then all will be lost."

Again she clutched the door, but did not throw it wide. Her hand remained there and she looked at the startling tableau in the chamber and gasped.

The hand of Joral took the vial from Major Rubio's hand; it fell back to the bed, but the snaky eyes were not taken from the face of the charmed assassin.

"It is wonderful," thought Hagar. "I never thought he possessed such power as this."

Slowly Major Rubio turned from the bed and came toward the door again. Hagar drew back and he passed without seeing her; then she heard him go down the staircase to the library.

It was at an end at last; the spell had been broken as mysteriously as Joral had set it in motion, and when Hagar heard the door below open and shut, she sprung from her place in the hall and ran down.

In another moment she had rushed into the library, but the sight of the white faced and shivering man in the chair there brought her to a halt.

"What have you done?" she asked.

A singular smile came to Major Rubio's lips.

"Where have I been?"

"What, don't you know?" cried Hagar. "Give me the bottle."

He put his hand into his bosom, but it clutched nothing. When he drew it out empty he smiled again, but he was the picture of astonishment and pallor.

"I have lost it!" he groaned.

"No, it was taken from you," said Hagar, bending over him and grasping his arm. "It was spelled away by that infamous wretch who seems to have power over everything. You have been robbed."

"No. I have lost the precious vial."

"It is in this house!" cried Hagar. "It is up yonder."

"It can't be."

"Don't you remember going up to his room? Don't you recall your visit to the door of Joral's chamber with the vial in your hands? Think a moment."

"It comes back to me. I was there!"

"You went up to finish the secret-keeper—the man we should have finished long ago."

"Yes. I left the vial in his room. It must not remain there!" and Major Rubio sprung up and started toward the door, but the hand of Hagar stopped him midway.

"It is there, but it is in the keeping of the man from Bengal," she whispered. "It is in his hands, I say. You have been spelled. He simply robbed you of the bottle!"

"Robbed me?"

"He did nothing less, that man."

Major Rubio went back to his chair and from its depths looked up at Hagar the Dark.

"Is he there yet?"

"I think so."

"With the poison in his hands? He must have wanted that bottle all these years. It strengthens his secret. It was with that very bottle that I invaded the temple and struck with death the guards of the idol. He knows that, but until to-night he has not laid hands on the vial and its contents. We must not let this man use his victory. We must put Joral Jet beyond reach of the terrible power he possesses."

"You are right."

Major Rubio sat helpless for a moment.

"I shall go to Theron," he said at last.

"To this man with the thumbless hand?"

"Yes."

"Theron is terrible. I know that. He is a person to be dreaded; but why go to him? He has failed once. His fingers sunk into Joral's throat, but he came back to life. The Thumbless Hand may know how to kill men in their little rooms and how to baffl the detectives; but he can't deal successfully with a man like Joral, the Hindoo."

"If he cannot, who can?"

"I will try."

"You, Hagar?"

"Why not?"

Major Rubio drew back and looked at her.

"When will you try?" he asked.

"Now!"

"With the vial in his hands and all his tricks of life and death ready to be sprung upon you?"

"Even so! This crisis has come. You are right, brother. This man holds the secret of the theft of the gems and he knows also the true history of the girl in the blue chamber."

"My God! I had forgotten that."

"Then I will see what Hagar can do. I will see what this hand can accomplish as against the dark magic of this son of the Ganges. It was a dark day when you first met the Indian demon, brother."

"I should have killed him on it."

"You should have killed him when you came of the temple and found him crouching in the shadows of the tamarinds with your secret already in his keeping."

"And you will break the spell! By Jove! I believe you will succeed, Hagar."

She drew from beneath the folds of her black garment a dagger, the handle of which looked like black ivory, and which was fantastically carved.

"With that?" cried Major Rubio.

"Yes. It is better than the poison of the East. He shall not spell my hand, but it shall descend upon him with the quickness of a thunderbolt, and the days of Joral, the mystic, will end with his present sleep!"

Hagar fell back and passed from the room.

"What a creature!" cried Major Rubio, looking after her. "She will succeed. The dagger will succeed where the vial failed! Ah, Hagar is better than a thousand potions."

He heard her on the staircase for a moment, and then her footsteps ceased.

Five minutes passed—they seemed that many hours to the breathless man in the library—then there was the sweeping sound of a garment in the hall, and Hagar rushed in and sunk at his feet with a low cry.

Major Rubio sprung toward her, but with a gasp her head fell back and the lifted body slid from his arms to the floor.

"Spelled to her death!" he cried. "Killed by the master of mystery! Where is the wretch?"

He sprung from the room and rushed up the stairs. A few bounds carried him to the apartment where he had been fascinated by the little eyes of Joral, but he stooped at the door.

The couch was empty! The room had no tenant, and while Major Rubio stood at the door gazing upon this emptiness with his eyes starting from his head, he heard a sound at the foot of the flight.

"Ah! there you are, villain!" he exclaimed, springing down the steps three at a time. "I shall have your blood for this last crime!"

The man in the hall did not move. He seemed to stretch forth his sallow neck, and Major Rubio, looking into the eyes that regarded him, stopped and clutched the bannisters for support.

"When I come back it will be to claim my wife," said a voice from below. "Good-night, sahib."

Then this cool demon walked away, and the door shut behind his slender figure.

"The devil in dark! Satan in tan!" cried Major Rubio, as he descended and re-entered the room where the figure of unconscious Hagar lay at full length on the sumptuous Brussels.

Joral Jet was gone. The master of magic and serpents—the keeper of the secret—had carried off the poison of the Ganges!

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE HUG OF MOTHER CLUTCH.

"I CAN'T dream any more. It is very strange, but it is true. The power has left me and I am nearly well."

Thus spoke Winton White to Ford Fox, the detective, almost at the very hour when the scenes we have just recorded were taking place in Major Rubio's house.

"I'm glad of that, Winton," said the ferret. "You will come out of the shadows with renewed health and Edna will rejoice to have you at her side again."

At mention of the name the young dreamer started.

"I dare not hope this," he went on. "You must not put such hopes in my head, Ford. The girl is in bad hands; she is in the power of the man whom she calls father and the old wretch whose serpents have won for him an unenviable reputation will exert his powers against her. I wish I had choked him a little harder than I did, but perhaps his magic would have saved him just the same. Yes, Ford, I shall soon be seen on the streets again; but I have lost my friends and will have to find others."

"That won't be hard to do. They will come to you with no efforts on your part. But I am off."

"You will come back soon, Ford?"

"To-morrow at the furthest."

"I shall look for you. I shall expect you will bring good news."

Ford Fox, the Gotham detective, made his way from Winton White's house and paused for a moment on the corner in the light of a lamp.

"Great heavens! his specter!" cried a voice, and a man came to a sudden halt and stared at the ferret.

When Ford moved on again he had a tracker, but all at once this person fell back and ran across the street, dodged down an alley and appeared suddenly to a man who, with a hunched back, looked grotesque in the light of his lamp.

"I thought you said he was in the pit?" he cried, seizing this man and almost jerking him from the chair.

"I did," cried Fider. "I looked and saw him there."

"You did not see him there, or else he has escaped."

"What, after that tremendous fall? Impossible!"

"Then, I have seen his shadow."

"What do you mean?" and Fider turned his face full upon the curious Theron. "You don't mean to tell me that the detective is alive?"

"I do."

"Then I leave this city at once! I don't want that man after me."

"You ought to have him at your heels, blunderer!" hissed Theron. "I ought to throttle you, fool!"

Fider, showing his teeth like a plagued wolf, said:

"Try it!"

But the Thumbless Hand did not. He fell back, however, and looked at Fider. Perhaps he did not care to lose an ally.

"We'll go and look. A look will settle it," said Theron.

"What, go back to the house of the trap?"

"Yes. Come, Fider."

They left the place together, and Theron led the way. They entered the trap, and the hand of the strange man lifted the trap in the floor.

"Now, your match," said he.

In another instant a light was let down into the place, and Fider exclaimed, triumphantly:

"I told you so. There he is."

A human body was lying among the ooze of the dark pit, for a moment illumined by the match, and Theron turned and looked at his companion.

"Go down and see!" he commanded.

Fider shrunk from the ordeal, but at last, with a stout cord about his waist, he lowered himself into the pit, and Theron saw him approach the silent occupant of the place.

"There you are, Fider. Now, lift it from the water and take a good look at it."

The strong arms of Fider did this disgusting job, and Theron watched him with a cool face and sparkling eyes.

"Has he a smooth face?" asked the Thumbless Hand.

"No. He has a full beard."

A laugh went down to Fider.

"That will do. Carry him over to yon corner and leave the poor fool to himself. It is the wrong man."

"What, the wrong man?" wailed Fider.

"Yes, you never sprung the trap on the detective at all."

"Now, Heaven help us all!"

Fider came up over the rope and stood before Theron, his face white and his hands shaking.

"Now I am going back," he said.

"Yes, go. I can get along without such failures as you. Go back, Fider, the sooner the better—for yourself."

Half an hour later Theron of the Thumbless Hand might have been seen watching a light in a window near Broadway. It was a light which seemed to tell him a great deal, and for some time he watched it with a steady look.

"Is he up there?" he asked himself. "Is the detective—this man who has more lives than a cat—is he yonder, I say?"

He crept toward the building in which the light was; he drew closer and closer, carrying one of his hands suspiciously near his waist and the other at his side.

"Why not do it myself? Why not make a tiger-spring and fix him forever? No one will see and the secret will be mine—the fox out of the way. Then and not until then will we be safe. This man is persistent, cool and terrible. This is the one evil genius of the game, for Joral sleeps behind the wall and the serpents will hiss themselves to death in the old den."

The hallway of the building had no door and Theron slipped inside.

He crept up the staircase which he found at once and, knowing where was to be found the room in whose window he had seen the light from the street, he glided toward it and was there at last.

Ford Fox, the Never-fail Ferret, was beyond that door and it might be locked.

All Theron had to do was to knock and see the door open. Then for the tiger leap and a pair of hands at the detective's throat—that was all!

Armed as no man before him was armed, with a hand which, though maimed, had the power of a vise, he approached the door and at last stopped there.

A clock in the nearest tower struck twelve.

Theron raised his hand and rapped at the detective's door.

Then he drew to one side and made ready for the spring.

It seemed to Theron that the whole building was wrapped in slumber.

His rap sounded through the room beyond the door and he heard some one coming.

In another moment the door would open. That was what he wanted.

Theron heard the turning of a key and then the lock flew back.

At last!

All unconscious of the death that awaited him by the hand which he had escaped so long, Ford Fox was almost in the villain's power.

Theron did not breathe now. His face was white, but it had the hue and look of a fiend's.

The door opened and Theron threw his body forward.

But what made him stop as if he had confronted some one from the other world?

Why didn't he finish the leap and land with terrific force against the person who had opened the way for him?

A cry which was a wild shriek sounded throughout the room and Theron fell back with a oath of wonder.

He had come face to face with Mother Clutch!

The old woman, almost as white as a cloth, stared at him and would have shut the door if her surprise had not dominated her nerves.

She was spellbound; she could not close that portal for looking at the frightened man into whose trap she had been.

"You here?" suddenly cried Theron, bending forward with a demoniac laugh. "In God's name, woman, how did you get out?"

He hardly knew what he said.

"I dug out like a rabbit," said Mother clutch.

"Then you will go back again!"

He had recovered.

With a hand that went toward Mother Clutch's face Theron threw himself at her, but she eluded the fingers and sprang back.

The door was closing on him when he rushed against it and the old woman was thrown halfway across the room and nearly from his grip.

"All's fish that comes to Theron's net!" laughed he as he dragged Mother Clutch toward the table and noted how hideous fright had rendered her. "I will send you after the child."

She burst into a laugh.

"That will please me to a dot," said she.

"Tina is safe. I know where she is. She got out of your trap, ha-ha!"

"Got out? You lie, woman."

"Just as you think, Theron of the Thumbless Hand. You will never find Tina now."

"Where is she?"

The answer was a chatter that displayed two rows of ragged teeth and the hands of Mother Clutch fell about his arm.

"You may kill me, but you can't rob me of that secret!" she cried. "No, you can't make me tell where the little one is—the witness, ha-ha."

He said nothing.

"You did not expect to find me here, did you?" continued the old woman.

"Never mind that. You don't know where Tina is."

"I do, but you shall not find her. You came up to see the detective. Did you grind off the serpent's tail in the room where Number 99 died?"

"What's that?"

"Did your heel grind off that tail? We found it there, Ford and I. He said some man must have set foot on the snake while trying to escape from it. Don't you know, Theron, that Hiram Harkness wasn't killed by the cut in the neck—that it was made to conceal the bite of a serpent?"

How strangely he was gazing at her. Who had put this theory in that old creature's head—ay, who but Ford Fox, the detective?

Suddenly he retreated toward the door with her in his grip. It was nothing for him to drag her over the matting, for he had the powers of a giant, and, while Mother Clutch was no weakling despite her years, she was a child in his hands.

"Are you going to take me back to the trap?" she asked.

"Yes!"

"Back to the room where rats are?"

"To a worse place than that!" he laughed.

"Mother Clutch, you have too dangerous a theory for me."

He was almost at the door when some one was heard coming down the corridor outside.

In an instant the deep-set eyes of the old woman lit up with hope.

Was Ford Fox coming to the rescue?

The Thumbless Hand heard the footsteps and looked toward the door. He would have kicked it shut with his nearest foot if he could, but the distance was too great. He could not have reached the portal.

All at once a cry for help ran from Mother Clutch's throat.

As it came forth a man reached the door and Theron, dropping the withered wrist, stood like one spellbound in the center of the room.

He had turned to the door and with a cool smile was looking at the man who stood there.

Ford Fox, the ferret!

Face to face at last stood the detective and his quarry.

The thumbless hand, ungloved for once, hung at its owner's side, but not for long.

Suddenly he threw it toward his hip, a quick, cat-like motion, and then with the spring of a jaguar, Mother Clutch reached him and her long skeleton arms went round his neck and he found himself in the strangest grasp imaginable.

In vain did he try to tear himself from the hag's clutch. The arms tightened till they seemed to sink into his body, and for once in its history, the Thumbless Hand was useless.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

STERN JUSTICE WINS.

IN the den of the serpent-seller all was dark.

Here and there something long and sinuous crept across the floor, and now and then hisses came from amid the gloom and died away, or continued, as the snakes crawled hither and thither in search of something living to sting.

This was on the night of the capture of Theron by Mother Clutch, and the clocks were striking the midnight hour as the sounds of footsteps approached the old Hindoo's den.

The figure that came down the alley and reached the door which so many dreaded, had a gliding motion and in the face were set two snapping eyes that danced as they noted the place.

It was Joral Jet, coming back to his own.

Back to the pets so dangerous and deadly came the old man of mystery. He smiled when he recalled the last scene in the house of Major Rubio.

He had baffled that man and had even disarmed him by taking away the deadly poison with which he had sought his room; he had "spelled" the white man in his own home and the thief of the gems—the cool head who had robbed the idol—was almost powerless since he (Joral) had robbed him of the terrible weapon—the vial.

On the threshold of his den Joral Jet halted and at last lifted the latch. In another moment he stood in the dark and seemed for a moment to look into the room and see what awaited him there.

Was he astonished? He knew nothing about what had taken place during his absence.

All at once something brushed his leg, and he stooped and then struck a light.

Joral Jet saw something which for a moment filled him with terror.

The master of the serpents looked down at the hissing, crawling things about him and drew back—back from his snakes for the first time in his life.

They were loose; in every direction they writhed and tossed, intermingled in battle, fighting each other and driving into each other's bodies the deadly fangs which showed in mercy.

The door had swung shut behind old Joral.

He looked across the chamber, and saw the niche where he kept the powerful antidote for the stings of his pets. It was just out of his reach, and to get to it he would have to pass through a gantlet of death.

Shutting his teeth hard he resolved to make the attempt.

Brushing aside a serpent that tried to coil about his leg, he darted across the room and threw wide the door.

In went his hand, and for a moment was lost in the depths of the niche; then, with a shriek, Joral fell back and looked at the greenish thing that writhed at his wrist, its little head and beady eyes just above his hand.

For a moment the old man stood and looked at the snake.

"It is the little killer!" broke from the Indian, and then he seized the reptile and tried to pull it off.

But its folds remained wrapped around his dark arm, and the more he tried to loosen it the more it seemed determined to remain where it was.

Old Joral turned once more to the niche where safety lay. He had nearly gained it when he staggered back and tottered toward the table. The snake at his arm fell off; the little eyes were deadened, as if the loss of the serpent's venom had deprived it of all its deadly powers.

Suddenly, with a half cry, the body of Joral slid to the floor.

Another snake crawled to it and looked into the face where the glazed eyes and the twitching lips told the terrible story of approaching death.

A boa came from its dark corner and immediately engaged the little serpents, but it was too late; the master had been bitten by his deadly pets.

Morning came and the serpents looked at the light that came into the room and blinked their beady eyes. The man on the floor bore but little resemblance to Joral Jet; but he was no one else.

Suddenly some one opened the door, and fell back with a startled cry.

"Safe at last!" cried this person. "The serpents have made the keeping of the secret sure."

"Do you think so, Major Rubio?"

The man went down the street and turned toward the home of Hagar.

That person awaited him in her parlor and caught the gleam that lit up his eyes as he came in.

"The snakes have avenged us!" he exclaimed. "Let us thank Heaven, Hagar, for the fangs of the jungle!"

She did not ask him what he meant; she seemed to know, and for a full minute she stood and smiled at him, with her hands clinched and her face white, but full of triumph.

Theron of the Thumbless Hand stood in a narrow room which looked very like a cell, and was watching the iron door with eyes that lost no shadow or ray of sunlight.

The hand which had given Ford Fox the clue to the strange murder in the old house, rested on his hip and now and then he let it close, as if it would find the throat of an enemy there.

"He stays long," said Theron. "He said he would come this morning and take what I had for him—for the detective! I would like to know what fool came to the trap to descend to his death when Fider touched the button in the wall. Well, well, Major Rubio shall not have the secret all to himself. This man, whose great feat was the theft of the gems in the Hindoo temple, shall not live in plenty while I go, perhaps, to the noose for making the secret as safe as I could. Number 99 was about to give to the world the story of the gems, and not only this, but suspecting that Major Rubio was concerned in the stealing of the babe, his child, from Mother Clutch, its nurse, he was about to rob him again of that person—now Edna, the Beautiful."

Footsteps came down the corridor, and Ford Fox stood in the prisoner's presence.

Theron watched him a moment, and, seeing no look of victory on the calm, cool face of the man who had hunted him down, put out his hand and said:

"You will read what I have here, but perhaps you already suspect."

A folded paper dropped into the detective's palm, and going over to the light side of the cell, he looked at it a moment.

"Mother Clutch has prepared me for this," said he. "I have more than suspected that Edna, the so-called child of this Major Rubio, is really Hiram Harkness's daughter."

"It is true," answered Theron. "This is the secret we guarded so well; this is the one for which I went to Number 99's den that night with the snake bought of Joral Jet in the green bag. Don't you see that if this convict had lived he would have charged Major Rubio with being the same man who years and years ago robbed the Indian temple? He would have told, too, that he suspected that the child now called his daughter was, in reality, his long-lost babe, and Mother Clutch, her nurse, stands ready to recognize her by certain marks which she must carry. This was the sword that hung over our heads."

The detective looked at the man, as cool now as a summer morn, and bowed.

"But for the failure of my plans we would not stand here, Ford Fox, with yourself the victor and me the vanquished. After Hiram

Harkness had received the sting of the serpent the little thing fell to the floor and, as if on vengeance bent, rushed toward me, and in crushing it with my foot I fell against the wall and left there the imprint of my maimed hand. The sharp-eyed little thing whom Mother Clutch was raising saw it, and then your own eyes fastened on it. The mark on the wall was the clue that started you, eh, Ford Fox?"

"It was a starter, not very definite, for there may be a hundred Thumbless Hands in this city; but the moment I saw you drinking up the revelers' wine in the old house, whither I had followed Mother Clutch, I felt that I had seen the owner of the hand which left its mark on Number 99's wall."

"You were right. That night you saw Theron of the Thumbless Hand, and from that hour my doom was sealed!"

In another part of the city, looking into the eyes of a young girl at whose side stood Ford Fox, sat Major Rubio, his face white and his whole aspect haggard indeed.

He knew that the game was up; he realized that the whole drama had been played out, and that with the story of his deed in India to startle the city, and the secret that Edna was not his child but the daughter of Hiram Harkness, stolen by him years before from Mother Clutch to aggravate the excitement, he was at "the end of the cord."

And so it proved.

Hagar, the Dark—Hagar, his sister—came to the house and fell back at sight of the man who looked at her from the middle of the room.

"I should have finished you when I had a chance with the black-handled dagger; but Theron will do it yet!"

Ford Fox smiled.

"Theron is as harmless as the paper-knife on your table," he said. "The Thumbless Hand has told the whole story in writing and we know that the trail of the red clue on the wall has not proved a bootless one."

In an instant the subtle woman looked at Major Rubio and then whirled upon the ferret.

"You will be praised for this, but that creature yonder will know that she is the child of a convict!"

"Better his child than the heir of a man with two names," was the girl's quick retort.

Time came when Theron, the Thumbless Handed, walked from the cell into the crowded court-room and there told with his usual coolness the story of the red mark on the wall.

Joral never came forward to tell anything, and the old serpent-seller—the mystic of the East, the man who seemed to have power over life and death—passed from history with the last hisses of his deadly pets.

Major Rubio delivered up the gems which he had kept so long and they crossed the ocean to shine once more in the rings of the ivory goddess.

Hagar, the Dark, vanished from public view, and, as there was no charge against her, she was not molested; but after her departure a man was found dead in an old house, and the ferret of Gotham who looked into the handsome face—for death had not robbed it of its manly beauty—recognized the man who had plotted so deeply to keep everlasting guard over two secrets—the theft of the Indian gems and Edna's parentage.

Out of the very shadows of death, as it were, came Winton White, the dreamer, and in a short time he found his way to the side of the woman he loved, who became his wife, loved none the less because a stain rested on her father's name.

Mother Clutch was placed in good circumstances by Edna, who inherited Major Rubio's wealth by will, and little Tina became the solace of her declining years.

The child grew up to be very beautiful, and now and then told the story of the thumbless hand that drew the curtain the night of the crime, and how she saw it leave its crimson mark on the convict's wall.

Theron of the Thumbless Hand went to his death with that composure which had marked all the blows he struck, and Ford Fox who had solved the mystery of Number 99 went back to wait for another puzzle in red and to receive again the thanks of Edna, now the wife of the young dreamer.

The identity of the poor wretch who wandered into the trap set for Ford Fox was never discovered. It remains to this day one of the minor mysteries of the metropolis.

Old Joral's den no longer exists and a handsome building stands where the serpents hissed and their master sent them out to deeds of secret death. Justice was a long time reaching the old scoundrel; but his end was appropriate and the poison which he sold for gold avenged the crimes of more than a lifetime.

THE END.

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